The Discursive Construction of Distance-Learning Student Identities in a Module-Related Facebook forum

Thesis

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Version: Redacted Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21954/ou.ro.00013232

oro.open.ac.uk
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Doctorate in Education

Education

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Abstract

Student use of social media in Higher Education is almost ubiquitous, yet academic understanding of how such groups function is limited. Innovatively, the aim of this research was to explore how distance-learning, xxxxD, Open University students informally used one Facebook forum, with no official tutor presence, to discursively build and manage identities. Previous research has shown that online and in ‘real life’, students construct positions of ‘ordinary’ and ‘struggling’ thereby resisting academic identities. The analysis from this research demonstrates the complexities involved in discursively managing being a student on Facebook when they are outwith the formal university environment.

By employing discursive psychology and examining how psychological states are worked up and managed via discourse and Facebook affordances, such as emoji and use of laughter (like ‘haha’), the research captures the scale of variability of available identities students draw on in the forum. When asking for help, advice or support, students positioned themselves as seekers, strugglers, anxiety-laden, desperate, panickers, procrastinators and obsessives, but not without a sense of humour. When offering help, advice and support, students positioned themselves as helpful, advice-givers and supporters, using alignment and idiom, among other techniques. Complaint sequences demonstrated that openings were alternatively launched into straight away or delayed; that they were established by providing detail, extreme case formulations, alignment and contrast and, if they were completed, done by using idiom, punctuation and emoji. The research demonstrates that Facebook forums are places students can go to find and build social solidarity but also are a double-edged sword: positive in that they can offer support and negative in that student voices can create subject positions of disempowerment.

This empirical illustration can be applied to help students understand the dynamics of Facebook forums. Such dissemination will be done by creating and delivering conversation analytic role-play method (CARM-text) (Stokoe, 2014) workshops for students, so they become empowered in their decision making when using social media. The research could also inform others in education of how such forums may function.

1 Redacted text: see appendix 5.
Keywords: Discursive Psychology, students, Facebook, social media, support forums, identity, online pedagogy, CARM-text

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1 Introduction

This research is about how xxx students discursively build identities in a Facebook forum, and how these identities function to gain help, advice and support. It is also about how that help, support and advice is offered and how complaints are managed in the forum.

The introduction explains some of the background needed to understand the research, covers the conceptual and theoretical frameworks and outlines the thesis structure.

1.1 Inspiration for the research

Social media use among students is such a concern among Universities that policies are put in place regulating student use of them (see The Open University, 2017, for an example). Such documents cover sensible use policies, like copyright, avoiding bringing the university into disrepute and not engaging in inappropriate behaviour (for example, bullying another student). Universities are aware that many students are using these platforms for their studies, but guidance and research on the precise function of such groups is limited. As a result, this research investigates how a group of xxxxxx, Open University (OU) students build learner identities to ask for and offer help and complain in a Facebook forum.

From a professional perspective, as a tutor at the OU, this research arose because of my own concerns over my students’ use of Facebook. I felt that my own practice could be improved if I knew more about these forums and how they operate, as I would be better placed to advise my students appropriately. I also felt the research would be of interest to my colleagues and the wider Higher Education sector, as it reveals how learners construct themselves when they are not in a formal educational environment, but still engaging in academically related discourse. The research allows us to understand that which was previously difficult to obtain - how students interact with no formal tutor presence.

It is especially important for Universities providing distance-learning education to be aware of how students are discussing their learning and behaving on Facebook, as students may rarely (if ever) interact with other students and staff members face-to-face. Also, as education moves more online as a whole, it is pertinent that we understand as much as we can about communication in the online

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world. While this research does not use an official educational forum, it does offer us insight into what students are doing online in their own spaces, without tutor presence.

1.2 A note on terminology — Background on the Open University model

Some of the terminology used in this thesis needs to be explained for those unfamiliar with the OU model. The OU is a distance-learning university based in Milton Keynes in the UK, founded in 1969. The headquarters are based in Milton Keynes and currently there are also offices in Belfast, Dublin, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Manchester and Nottingham. As the research is on xxxx\textsuperscript{4} undergraduates, the following information is in relation to these students. Student groups are allocated an Associate Lecturer (AL), their tutor, who is the students’ main point of contact. Student undergraduate groups in xxxx\textsuperscript{5} usually have 15-20 students, based in a cluster, which is a geographically dispersed combined group of tutor-groups. Students can attend any tutorial, so may attend sessions where they are not being taught by their ‘own’ tutor. The Student Support Team (SST) is a key point of contact for students who need advice about their studies that are not subject-specific, such as administrative and academic support matters.

In terms of tuition, undergraduate teaching takes a blended approach, using face-to-face and online teaching. Attendance at tutorials is voluntary. Some students will never meet their fellow students or tutor face-to-face. ALs run tutorials, mark student work and advise them on academic issues, as well as managing and contributing to module-based online forums on the OU online platform. ALs also manage late submissions of coursework (extensions). Given the student demographic (distance-learners, often with multiple demands on their time and sometimes complex additional needs) extensions are asked for regularly and given generously. Tutors can offer up to 21 days for an extension, without penalty for the student, after which a tutor must refer to their line manager for further advice.

A TMA is an acronym for tutor marked assignment and an EMA is an ‘end of module’ assessment. The online marking system is called the eTMA (electronic tutor marked assignment) system. Students are assessed via a variety of TMAs (In xxxx\textsuperscript{6}, usually a mix of essays, reports and short exercises) and larger projects at the end of their module (either an EMA or an exam). On this particular xxxx\textsuperscript{7}

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module used in this research, students needed to get a 40% average on their TMAs and a 40% score for the EMA in order to pass. This particular module does not count towards the overall degree score. Tutors mark both TMAs and EMAs, but students’ EMAs are marked by other tutors who teach on the module.

1.3 A brief introduction to Facebook

Facebook began in 2004 at Harvard University (Hew, 2011). It is a social networking site, where people can interact with anyone else who is on Facebook and has accepted them as a ‘friend’ or who is in the same group as them. Currently, when people first open up Facebook in an app or online, they are asked ‘what’s on your mind’. This acts as a prompt for a ‘status update’ (where people may report on something that is happening).

People on Facebook can join groups which are usually based around a specific interest. These groups can be open (where anyone can join) or closed (where you need to ask the admin if you can join) or secret (where you need an invite to join). This project is examining interaction in one of these - an OU ‘secret’ student group, with their module being the particular interest. People in an interest group may or may not have met face-to-face. In these groups, people can post messages to each other, ‘like’ others’ posts and comment on them. They may also upload pictures, videos and web-links. They may use Private Messenger to talk each other, where only those invited to the private message can see the conversation. Messages that are posted on the group's newsfeed (public space) can be seen by anyone in the group.

1.3.1 The conceptual and theoretical frameworks

1.3.1.1 The Conceptual Framework

In order to situate my research in context, I identified different areas I needed to research and created a conceptual framework (see figure 1). The conceptual framework was informed by my overarching research question — ‘How do students build identities and account for their learning in a Facebook forum?’ The diagram shows the different areas of reading I undertook.
How do students build identities and account for their learning in a Facebook forum?

It can be seen that many different areas were explored including identities, the online educational environment, discursive psychology and the other related research, in order to inform the research question. These sections are all summarised and analysed in this chapter and chapter 2.

1.3.2 Theoretical Framework

My theoretical framework was heavily influenced by the turn to language in social psychology. My research draws on Edwards and Potter’s (1992) model of discursive psychology and Wetherell’s (1998) paper on synthesising the fine-grained focus of conversation analysis and the Foucauldian-influenced approaches toward a broader, critical focus. The history behind discursive psychological
approaches will be elaborated later in the literature review, in chapter 2, but for now I provide an outline of these analytic approaches, which will then feed in to demonstrating my research position at the end of this section.

There are different discursive psychological theories. What they share in common is the idea that discourse is performative, and that we do things with words. This is what Edwards and Potter’s (1992) model (figure 2) is primarily concerned with. The model below demonstrates the three overarching concepts of Edwards and Potter’s (1992) model of language in use, covering matters of action, fact and interest and accountability.
Figure 2: Discursive Action Model (Edwards and Potter, 1992, p.154)

**Action**
1. The focus is on action, not cognition.
2. Remembering and attribution become, operationally, reportings (and accounts, description, formulations, versions and so on) and the inferences that they make available.
3. Reportings are situated in activity sequences such as those involving invitation refusals, blamings and defences.

**Fact and Interest**
4. There is a dilemma of stake or interest, which is often managed by doing attribution via reports.
5. Reports are therefore constructed/dispayed as factual by way of a variety of discursive techniques.
6. Reports are rhetorically organised to undermine alternatives.

**Accountability**
7. Reports attend to the agency and accountability in the reported events.
8. Reports attend to the accountability of the current speaker’s action including those done in reporting.
9. The latter two concerns are often related, such that 7 is deployed for 8 and 8 is deployed for 7.

The three sections of the model, action, matters of fact and interest and accountability, should be seen as fluid and overlapping. This fluidity accounts for the complexities of discourse when discourse is being analysed in an action-orientated way (Potter, 2000). The core concept is action, focusing on what people do with their discourse, instead of examining cognitive states and processes that underlie language use. DP explains that the language of cognitive states and processes (such as remembering) are drawn on to accomplish business, such as to convince, blame and argue. Here, instead of representing cognitive states and processes, cognitive representations are reworked as discursive constructions (Potter, 1996). The second part of the model matters of fact and interest, looks at what is reported and the nature of these reports. In order to accomplish action such as blaming, complaining and convincing, the writer or speaker must manage the dilemma of appearing to have a stake in the claim (Edwards and Potter, 1992; for more on this, see Lamerichs and te Molder, 2011) In relation to this they must work to avoid accusations of inaccuracy and construct their accounts in a way to not be undermined. The third part of the model, accountability is about how reports attend to matters of agency and accountability, such as who did what, why and where responsibility might lie.
Focusing on language-in-use, as opposed to assumed underlying cognitive states, underpins Edwards and Potter’s (1992; Edwards, 1997) reworking of cognitive psychology. This is the stance I take in my thesis – that the focus is on what the students do with their discourse rather than what they are thinking or feeling. DP asserts that such thoughts and feelings and cognitions cannot be directly observed through discourse. This does not mean that what people say never indicates what they might be thinking. Radford et al., (1999) explain that there is a cognitive link between talk and thought, and discursive psychologists do not dispute this. However discursive psychologists highlight that we cannot guarantee that what we say is a direct and reliable representation of cognition. Instead, the approach makes observations on external discursive action.

My research was interested in how evaluative assessments were used in the forum. An evaluative assessment is a judgement used to position something or someone in a particular way. Evaluative assessments, as flexible rhetorical devices, are not analysed from a cognitive stance as attitudes, but as assessments that are used to do an action. Potter (1998) argues, that because attitudes are not fixed internal entities, measuring them is fraught with difficulty. However, it is still common to use questionnaires and scales in psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) to measure attitudes, which maintains this status-quo. One aim of the discursive psychologist is to examine how these evaluative assessments unfold in turn-by-turn interaction, demonstrating the flexibility of such assessments. Such turn-by-turn interaction is important for Edwards and Potter because it attends to the micro-detail of interaction, which shows us how social business is accomplished.

Examining the micro details of turn-by-turn interaction was important to my thesis, as I was wanted to appreciate the students’ use of discourse in constructing their own worlds. However, I also drew on Wetherell’s (1998) synthetic approach. The synthetic approach arose from a debate between the those who practiced a fine-grained analysis by analysing data from the ‘bottom-up’ or ‘data first’, and those who drew on categories of people, such as gender and class to inform their analysis (the details of this will be elaborated on later). The different branches of discursive psychology can be seen as existing on a spectrum. At the micro-end there is a focus on the turn taking in interaction and at the macro there is a focus on broader systems of discourse, informed by society and culture. Wetherell (1998) advocates a synthetic approach. A synthetic approach draws on both the details of conversation and the wider social context, informed by scholarly knowledge. Wetherell’s (1998) position grew from a dissatisfaction with conversation analysis as to her, it ignored the wider context of discourse. However, she was also dissatisfied with top-down discourse approaches because these did not explore the micro interaction of data. Wetherell’s (1998) synthetic approach, draws on
several different aspects of discourse analysis from different approaches to create a more holistic account of data. Wetherell (1998) argues that this analysis is more substantial in helping researchers understand the data and reveal the complexities of everyday discourse.

Discourse, in the synthetic approach is constructed — in that we ‘take up’ available discursive resources in the world to create an utterance — and constructive — we use utterances that ‘exist’ to make new ones (Wetherell, 2001). These discursive resources mean people create versions of their social world, which in turn may create new ways of talking which can be used to re-construct. Wetherell’s (1998) synthetic approach focuses on the key concepts of interpretative repertoires and subject positions. Interpretative repertoires are the collecting together of familiar tropes and metaphors to categorise data into categories that are recognised by the cultural and social context people are in. These are argued to be the ‘building blocks’ (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003, p.496) of talk, which people use to account for events in order to perform discursive action. These repertoires are so familiar to people that they are quickly recognised in discourse performance. Work on repertoires has led to researchers appreciating the variability of discourse. A classic example of the use of repertoire is from Wetherell’s (1998) paper where she researched young men talking about being on a night out and their behaviour with women. In this paper, she identified repertoires such as male sexuality as performance and ethics of sexuality (Wetherell, 1998, p. 409), demonstrating that it is useful to understand both the detail of interaction and the wider social constructs in this data. In a further example, Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) examined women’s talk on being single. They identified four repertoires, including singleness as independence and choice and singleness as social exclusion. The research demonstrated that within the repertoires, subject positions (see next paragraph for definition) were drawn on by the women. For example, in the singleness as independence and choice repertoire, women positioned themselves as grateful for their single status.

Subject positions are the multiple and varied identity ‘slots’ that people can take up or be assigned to when talking or writing. Wetherell (1998) advocates using subject positions in analysis because the variability of discourse cannot be investigated fully by simply taking a turn-by-turn focus. By focusing on the fine details of interaction and taking into account the wider ‘social fabric’ (Wetherell, 1998, p.412) of argument, the richness of the data can be attended to. Wetherell illustrates this synthesis by examining different subject positions some young men draw on when talking about their nightlife. A participant works against the construction of being promiscuous by drawing on positions of being ‘lucky’, ‘drunk’ and ‘on the pull’ (Wetherell, 1998, p.408). The variety of positions here are revealed in
a short extract of talk. This analysis also demonstrates how people are negotiating their positions as talk unfolds.

Furthermore, Wetherell (1998) relates subject positions to the concept of accountability. Accountability is when discourse works to hold someone or something as accountable for their actions. For example, one way ‘Aaron’, in Wetherell’s (1998) research outlined above, accounts for his promiscuity by claiming that he was ‘lucky’. In this way, he is no longer intentionally promiscuous but accidentally so: he was not at fault. Similarly, in Gibson’s (2014) paper, it is demonstrated how a participant who is leaving an experiment accounts for why she is doing this. The analysis clarified that there was a pattern the participants followed. When the experimenter did not orient positively to the participants’ claim they were going to withdraw, participants responded by offering further reasons for why they should withdraw.

My research draws on this synthetic approach to demonstrate how pre-discursive repertoires and identity categories can be deployed in discourse to achieve particular social actions. I draw on both turn-taking and wider category analysis. I start with the data and work from the ground up. However, I also use identity categories, emerging out of the analysis, offering explanations that my participants have not necessarily referred to explicitly in their writing. This meant more complexities in the data could be revealed, and identity positions uncovered. The concept of positioning engages well with my research question on identities. These positions exist within repertoires, but the analysis of repertoires would have taken me beyond the boundaries of my research: it was not necessary to use these to answer my research question. This synthesis gives substantial depth to my participants’ discourse, and allows appreciation of the complexities involved, rather than simply ignoring this and just attending to the students turn-by-turn interaction.

I accept that my participants are working in a socially constructed environment, both in terms of Facebook as a phenomenon in itself, and in the construction of Open University education in xxxx. My analysis is also socially constructed within a similar framework, as I bring to it my knowledge and understanding of what it means to be an Open University tutor at this particular time. DP is often described as taking a broadly social constructionist approach at the relativist end of the realism-relativism spectrum (Potter, 1998) and I adopt this relativist approach, accepting that the object of analysis goes beyond the individual and affords us the opportunity to examine practices of rhetoric and how these unfold, without concerning ourselves with what really ‘makes’ the person or what is

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8 Date redacted: see appendix 5.
'true’. As has been explained, DP is not concerned with the theory of the person but with the way language functions, in other words, with the ontology of language. Ontology, as a word, can be classified as a discursive construction in itself.

Finally, I have chosen to use a discursive approach because I am not looking at how students feel when using Facebook, or the impact such forums have on their studies. As will be outlined later, research has been done in these areas. Instead, I am interested in how students use discourse to ask for and offer help, advice and support and complain. These areas can illuminate some of the discursive ‘trouble’ (Jefferson, 1988) students encounter when using Facebook, and how such difficulties can be resolved.

In chapters 4 and 5 I make use of a synthetic analysis to understand the identities that participants construct. These chapters demonstrate how there is value in using both micro interaction to understand participant orientations and the analysis of the categories that participants orient to, to understand how participants draw on and construct identities of student life. In chapter 6, which explores complaints, because the focus is more on the way complaints are opened, built up and closed, the analysis is more concerned with the turn-by-turn interactions of the participants. Through an understanding of these dynamics, CARM-Text workshops (Stokoe, 2014) are envisioned, which will allow students to understand the possible discursive dynamics at play in Facebook forums. Theoretically, my research builds on previous support forum research.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. As has just been outlined, the first chapter introduces the research and the conceptual, theoretical and ontological frameworks, specifically focusing on discursive psychology. The second chapter is the literature review. It reviews discursive psychological theory, where it is situated in relation to psychology and linguistics and why it is an appropriate perspective to use for this research. The review then looks at the literature on discursive psychology in more depth, examining the origins and progression of the theory. The literature review continues by examining the distinctions between micro and macro approaches in discursive psychology. It outlines and further justifies the chosen position I have taken on this for this thesis. Chapter 2 moves on to consider the affordances of online conversation, followed by engagement with previous research from a CA/DP approach and online support forums. Furthermore, previous research into
accountability, complaints and student identity is reviewed. Chapter two finishes with a summary of the rationale and the research questions. Chapter three outlines the methodology, focusing on the practical details of data gathering and analysis. The next three chapters are the analysis chapters. Each chapter covers the discursive analysis of forum threads, weaving the relevant literature through the analysis, concluding with a brief conclusion, pulling together the main threads from the research. Chapter four investigates how students use identities to ask for help, support and advice in the forum. Chapter five looks at how help, support and advice is offered. Chapter six examines how students build, respond to and close complaints in the forum. Finally, chapter seven looks at the analysis as a whole and summarises the three analytic chapters, comparing the findings to previous studies. It also evaluates the research and suggests some directions and recommendations for the future, in terms of practice, policy and research in light of what has been found.
2 Literature Review

Now the conceptual and theoretical frameworks have been presented, we can turn to the literature review. This chapter will outline and evaluate the origins of discursive psychology, followed by the affordances of online interaction (including emoji and laughter research). It will then cover research into online group interaction, including identity and support forums. Accountability and complaints literature will be investigated next, followed by a review of research into formal and informal learning spaces, including Facebook. Finally, research into student identity will be explored. A rationale for this thesis will be built into the literature review and summarised at the end of the chapter.

2.1 Origins of DP

As has been discussed in the previous chapter, DP began as a reaction against cognitive assumptions and cognitive dominance in psychology and language studies (Billig, 2012). In order to justify the use of DP for my project, it is necessary to understand the foundations of DP and that is where we now turn. This will show how my decision to use an integrated approach of discursive psychology, was informed and the reasons for doing so.

DP originated from various linguistic and sociological academic traditions, such as Wittgenstein’s philosophical investigations (1953), Gilbert and Mulkay’s (1984) analysis of scientific discourse, Austin’s speech act theory (1962), Goffman’s dramaturgical theory (1959) and Sacks et al.’s (1974) conversation analysis. The theory is also heavily influenced by structuralism and post-structuralism, Foucauldian analysis and critical discourse analysis. This is where the thesis now turns, demonstrating how the claim from DP, that discourse is situated in action, has evolved.

2.2 Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations and Gilbert and Mulkay’s scientific discourse

Wittgenstein (1953) saw language as a toolkit, where words are used for purpose and perform functions. He argued we cannot escape language as we use it, through commonly shared discourses, to understand, interpret and construct our worlds. He referred to ‘language games’, which humans use to communicate with each other and enforced the point that rule-based philosophies of language are theoretically problematic when the rules are not followed (Edwards, 1997).
The term ‘interpretative repertoires’ in critical DP comes from the research of Gilbert and Mulkay (1984). An interpretative repertoire is a common-sense way of understanding something, that people within a particular category will understand. Gilbert and Mulkay reworked the understanding of scientific discourse to demonstrate the use of interpretative repertoires. They claimed that scientific discourse was performative and socially constructed, in opposition to simply being a way of uncovering knowledge. These repertoires were shown to be used to achieve certain outcomes and to protect researchers’ results from being challenged (Edwards, 1997). The two repertoires Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) gleaned from their studies were an empiricist repertoire (a detached, formal repertoire of science) and a contingent repertoire (where human personalities and social factors were drawn on to construct discursive positions on science). Gilbert and Mulkay were also interested in the variability of accounts and how different stories are used for different purposes (Wooffit, 2005). The idea of a repertoire is drawn on by ‘macro’ discursive psychologists (the micro-macro continuum will be developed in more detail later).

2.2.1 Austin’s Speech Acts

Like Wittgenstein, Austin (1962) examined the active nature of words. From this, speech act theory developed, building on prior ideology and accepting that all speech works in a functional way and needs to be understood in context. Examples of speech acts include promising, offering and performing an action. Austin classified these speech acts as performative utterances. DP works on the premise that speech discourse is performative too. Speech act theory, and the others outlined here, however, were not focusing on the psychological, unlike DP.

Another major difference between speech act theory and DP is that speech act theory was developed on researcher-invented examples (Wiggins, 2017), whereas DP focuses on talk and text as it naturally unfolds. Investigating interaction in the everyday environment is the key to ethnomethodology — a sociological research method and one DP also draws on. Garfinkel (1967) and Goffman (1959) were its founders. Ethnomethodology is interested in ground-level social life as it unfolds – rather than doing research in a laboratory, where behaviour is manipulated and controlled. Ethnomethodology is the study of how people are as they are. It observes and records, if possible, people in their everyday lives (Wiggins, 2017).
The link between these theories, DP and my research is that I am interested in performative discourse and also in the nature of the environment the data is gathered from. I am looking at how discourse unfolds naturally in the online world of students (Facebook) – a ‘real’ rather than ‘illustrative example’ or ‘made-for-purpose environment’. This means we can see what students are actually doing and how they are doing it, out of the classroom.

2.2.2  Goffman’s Dramaturgical Theory

Closely related to ethnomethodology is Goffman’s dramaturgical theory (Goffman, 1959), which is another influence on DP. This theory incorporates all our areas of performance, explaining we are all actors on our own stage, playing out our lives. The metaphor extends to the use of props (our day-to-day usage of tools); ‘backstage’ (how we act in private) and ‘front-stage’ (how we perform/ act in front of others). We follow scripts (everyday ways of talking and understanding) and we act (do things with talk to achieve certain outcomes). Dramaturgical theory explains how we engage in ‘face-work’ or protect the way we appear to others. An example of how this idea can be applied to online material is Page’s (2012) sociolinguistic work on Twitter and celebrities. Page provides a more complex vision of ‘stage’. Page discusses how celebrities perform a specific identity on Twitter, classifying Twitter in some ways as ‘backstage’ for celebrities, where instead of displaying their public character, they can manipulate their identities into whatever they want the public to see. Page suggests that there is an illusion that the celebrity is talking to people individually. Tweeters will probably never meet most of their followers, so this distance means people can act in ways that are different than those they display in public. However, tweeting could also be seen as ‘front stage’ as there are social rules of performance to be followed on Twitter too.

Comparing Facebook use to dramaturgical theory is interesting. The Facebook ‘news-feed’ (the place where posts are visible to everyone) can be seen as frontstage and the person behind the screen, or even private messaging, as backstage. Facebook affordances (what Facebook allows us to do to interact (see section 2.4)) are the tools, and dramaturgical scripts are the appropriate ways to act on Facebook. It can be argued we engage in ‘face-saving’ activity (Brown and Levinson, 1987), by constructing ourselves in particular ways. This face-saving aspect of performance theory is all-important to my research, as it links to the way students perform different identities among others they may never have met in ‘real life’.
2.2.3  Sacks’ Conversation Analysis

Another of DP’s primary influences is conversation analysis (CA). CA developed from the work of Sacks et al. (1974). Sacks and Schegloff were students of Goffman and influenced by ethnomethodology and speech acts (Wiggins, 2017). Like DP, CA focuses on how people talk in a systematic way, rather than what is going on in the brain. However, CA differs from DP in that in CA, the focus is less on constructed accounts or versions of events, and more on sequencing and turn-taking, acceptances and refusals (Hepburn and Wiggins, 2005). DP is also deliberately noncognitive, unlike CA.

CA began with Sacks’ (1992) investigations into phone calls to a suicide helpline. Sacks noticed that people taking the calls sometimes had difficulty getting the caller to give their names. To investigate this, he looked at openings and highlighted that the use of ‘I can’t hear you’ appeared where one would normally expect a name to be revealed (Sacks, 1992, cited in Wooffit, 2005, p.6). Sacks explained that ‘I can’t hear you’ is part of a repair sequence. A repair sequence begins when trouble needs to be resolved. Sacks points out that it is not necessarily that the person cannot hear or can hear that is important. Instead, it is how the discourse is treated by the other that is important. The use of this phrase moves the conversation to a place where the person does not have to give their name.

Issues like turn-taking and sequencing may be very different in online data analysis than traditional CA, and this is reflected in research in the field of ‘digital CA’ (Giles et al., 2015). CA, and ‘digital CA’ have revealed how logical conversation is and DP draws on this. For the purposes of my research, I draw on CA, especially in chapter 6 (on complaints).

2.2.4  Structuralism and Saussure

With the structuralists and Saussure (n.d. cited in Potter and Wetherell, 1987) came the idea that language is systematic and consists of signifiers and the signified. The signified is the concept or ‘idea’ of something and the signifier is the actual word or noise that word makes when it is uttered. However, Saussure argued there was no natural relationship between the signified and the signifier (i.e., the furry, four-legged animal and ‘dog’). It is arbitrary. Barthes (1964;1972, cited in Potter and Wetherell, 1987) developed this theory and explored ‘second order signification’ where the signified sign could in itself signify further properties of itself. Potter and Wetherell (1987) use the example of
Post-structuralism and Foucauldian analysis

Post-structuralism took structuralism further and claimed a more relativist position: truths are not fixed and there is no ‘hidden structure’ (Wiggins, 2017, p.23) between the signifier and the signified. Foucauldian approaches are concerned with power relations in discourse and how these are created and maintained. Post-structuralists reject that there is one core identity and that instead identity is relative and ‘moves’ in discourse. Discursive psychologists also accept this. Foucault’s work was centred around understanding the power relations in society, with the aim of using that knowledge to improve the lives of the less fortunate. In order to do this, discourses of power and oppression needed to be uncovered. To Foucauldian discourse analysts, available discourses limit what people can say at certain points in time (Wooffit, 2005). The approach has been criticised for being ‘top down’ by some discursive psychologists – i.e., starting with issues of power and looking at how these are played out in discourse, as opposed to ‘bottom up’ – starting with the discourse to illuminate what is ‘really’ going on. Some researchers, such as Edley and Wetherell (1997) however, argue for an amalgamation of top-down and bottom-up approaches postulating that it is not only possible, but illuminating.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis is closely related to Foucauldian discourse analysis as it is also interested in power relations (Wooffit, 2005). It is an approach that focuses on institutional settings and discourse. It is often classified as an interdisciplinary theory as it draws on Bakhtin, Habermas and critical theory amongst others (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). The approach has been critiqued for being interdisciplinary and not bound to a particular method (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). The approach also draws on reflexivity, arguing that it is not possible to extract the researcher from the research (Billig, 1999a) and argues that there is no separation between language and the social/ political: they each construct the other. We can see here that there are definite connections between discursive psychology and CDA as both accept that language is co-constructive (Widdicombe, 1998). Indeed, at
the far end of the DP spectrum is a critical discursive psychological approach, such as Billig's (1999a), which will be elaborated on later.

2.3 Some links between linguistics, sociology and DP

We can see from the previous discussion that DP and some linguistic and sociological theories are interested in how we communicate. Theories from these disciplines have been very influential to the development of DP. The discussion will now investigate how DP fits into present-day linguistics. It was deemed appropriate to explore how DP is related to linguistics, as the thesis is situated within the strand of language and literacies in the Education faculty at the OU.

There are several important fields in linguistics such as developmental, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics (Radford et al., 1999). DP is related to the sociolinguistic thread of 'language, identity and culture', which investigates how we perform identity through language and social systems (Mallinson and Kendall, 2013). DP is given the status of an interdisciplinary theory in this part of Mallinson and Kendall’s text, so although it is a psychological theory, it is still recognised by some sociolinguists as relating to their field. This is not surprising as ‘within the fields of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, there is widespread recognition that language is central to creating, performing, and negotiating one's identities’ (Vasquez, 2013, p.12). Such overlaps can be seen in Vasquez’s (2013) discourse analysis research into identity on TripAdvisor and Deumert’s (2014) Bakhtinian analysis of social media, both of which are elaborated on later in this review.

However, there are also key tensions between sociolinguistics and DP, mainly in terms of cognition and analysis. In relation to identity research, both agree that ‘if all identities are discursively constructed, they need not be stable or unified, but will always be in flux and susceptible to change’ (Page, 2012, p.163). However, sociolinguists would accept that discourse comes, at least partially, from the head and DP has problems with how to research this assumption (Potter and Edwards, 2003), claiming that we have no evidence that what we say is truly revealing underlying states (what we think/ feel). It is for this reason that simply ‘combining’ sociolinguistic research with discursive research cannot just be a way for each to corroborate or ‘add’ to each other. The agnostically cognitive stance of DP means the theory challenges any cognitive assumptions of previous research and does not simply connect up ‘pieces of an existing jigsaw...neatly’ (Potter and Edwards, 2003, p.2). Also, the specific focus in DP is how psychological states are used in discourse to build identity and account for behaviour, not just discourse in general.
To illustrate, Potter and Edwards (2003) examined a corpus analysis of courtroom talk by Stubbs (1996), a sociolinguist. Stubbs argued that by measuring repeated words and phrases and assessing them quantitatively, patterns could be distinguished, which in turn means these language techniques can exist as cognitive, that is internal, frames of reference. Potter and Edwards argue we do not have the methods required to actually show this juncture between language and cognition. Furthermore, each utterance we make is individual and needs to be examined in context, so the generalisability of utterances is questionable. However, we can examine what courtroom talk is achieving and how this may lead to guilty or not guilty verdicts.

There are features from linguistics, and particularly stylistics, which also have similarities with DP, such as metaphor (Jeffries and McIntyre, 2010). Originally, stylistics was used on literary texts to examine what made them ‘literary’ but now is also applied to ‘everyday’ texts. Some of these features will be drawn on in the analysis of this research but will be looked at in terms of function.

Instead of examining where the origins of metaphors ‘come from’ (for example, Lakoff and Johnson, 2003) DP examines how the metaphors are used to achieve purpose. For example, in Edwards’ research (Edwards, 1997) a couple use discourses of emotion to convince a counsellor of the veracity of their own account. When Jimmy accuses Connie of flirting with another man, Jimmy tells us how he was ‘boiling’ with anger. Jimmy uses ‘boiling’ to justify his construction of being an angry man, comparing his anger to something that is so hot it will explode.

It can be seen from the above that sociolinguistics and DP are not in complete opposition, although they do differ. Whereas linguistics is more interested in the production of language, the discipline is not interested in how psychology is performed in discourse (Wiggins, 2017). Furthermore, Potter and Edwards (2003) argue, that the theoretical stance of sociolinguistics has meant choosing methods grounded in cognitive assumptions, such as questionnaires. Questionnaires attend to fixed categories, such as gender and class. DP, on the other hand, attends more to the flexibility of categories and how these are constructed in discourse. As I am interested in how students use discourse to construct an account of psychological states, such as stress, it makes further sense to use this as my perspective over other options.
2.4 Discourse Analysis and DP

Now we know where DP originated and its relationship to linguistics, we need to understand how discourse analysis and DP link, as this is often a source of confusion. Like linguistics, there are different branches of discourse analysis and different branches of DP. I have already outlined critical discourse analysis above, for example. It is important to understand that discourse analysis in this thesis means how we analyse discourse and for DP, this means we analyse discourse from a discursive psychological perspective. So, DP is a branch of discourse analysis.

2.4.1 The micro-macro continuum

Edwards and Potter (1992) first came up with the term ‘discursive psychology’, the title of their pioneering book. The aim of the theory was to challenge the reliance on experimental and questionnaire research as well as cognitive and social theory (Tileaga and Stokoe, 2016). The continuum of discursive psychology ranges from micro analysis to macro, with synthesised approaches following in between. At the far end of the continuum is a conversation analytic approach, which is focused on the minutiae and detail involved in turn-taking. Potter (1998) advocates taking this micro approach, claiming that all analysis can be improved by looking at CA and ‘turn taking, adjacency pairs, repair, and preference organisation’ (Potter, 1998, p. 240). CA driven approaches put more emphasis on naturally occurring data (such as mundane conversation) and much of this work has been done on telephone calls, such as that drawn on by Antaki (2011). It is also useful to note that interview data is not uncommon in discursive psychological approaches either (Potter and Hepburn, 2005).

At the other end of the continuum, is the ‘macro’ approach, concerned primarily with power and social structures and how these are played out in discourse. This end of the scale has been influenced heavily by post-structuralist theories. Wetherell and Potter (1992), for example, examined the interpretative repertoire and how it could be utilised in their study of racism. They examined how discourses (interpretative repertoires) around the social status of Maori accounted for that social status. They found repertoires of race, culture and nation constructed as heritage, therapy and ideology. This critical discursive approach focuses on cultural resources and the subject positions that are available to people to construct themselves in particular ways (Wiggins, 2017).
The two approaches did lead to a ‘divide’ in discursive psychology. The divide first became apparent in an argument on theory and method between Schegloff (1997) and Wetherell (1998). The argument is both theoretical and methodological. Schegloff and Wetherell battled over where analysis should begin: with the data or with over-arching political systems. Schegloff (1997) argued that CA approaches are more useful than post-structuralist approaches because they do not enforce prior categories on data. The data takes a ‘bottom-up’, data-driven approach. Feminism, for example, is a prior category that may be ‘imposed’ on the data. According to Schegloff (1997), if you go into analysis with ‘categories’ in mind, the minute details of interaction are missed. Schegloff claimed that if variation makes people feel analysis is awkward then that is exactly the reason it should be studied in the first place.

Wetherell (1998) argued against Schegloff (1997), claiming that conversation research needs to take into account culture and politics to offer a more comprehensive understanding of positioning and that CA can’t account for what it is trying to account for (why this utterance here). She also argued that CA is too narrow in approach and that there is benefit in drawing on both CA and post structuralism in analysing discourse. She argued for the consideration of interpretative repertoires in data. To Wetherell, ‘an interpretative repertoire is a culturally familiar and habitual line of argument comprised from recognisable themes, common places and tropes’ (Wetherell, 1998, p.22). For example, by using data from interviews with sixth form male students Wetherell (1998, p.220) evidenced the repertoire of ‘masculine identity as an achievement’.

Billig (1999a) took the argument further, against Schegloff, claiming that CA does have prior assumptions, and that this is something CA discursive psychologists miss. According to Billig, CA uses particular terms (such as first assessment, repair and preference structures) and cannot have a neutral stance as a researcher must be coming from somewhere. Billig also points out that traditional CA is imbued with inequality, such as academic researchers imposing their academic structures onto naturally occurring conversation. Billig agrees with Wetherell (1998) that conversation cannot be ‘neutral’. This argument continued with Schegloff (1999) reacting against Billig by explaining that CA psychologists accept inequalities exist, but that they can only be uncovered by and through CA. In Billig’s further reply (Billig, 1999b) it was concluded that CDA is more interested in the macro and CA in the micro and that each is unsuitable to research the other. Billig’s work is therefore at the macro end of discursive psychology, taking a rhetorical approach which is interested in ideological dilemmas (contradictions in discourse) (Billig, 1985).
My analytic approach, while tending towards the more fine-grained reading, sits somewhere between the two. Although I draw on Wetherell’s (1998) synthetic approach, I begin with a bottom-up approach to the data. I examine the micro-analytic details of interaction between students and how they use this to account for and build student identities. However, I also bring to my research my understanding of the wider, student/OU context. This means I work with participants’ terms and orientations as well as my own understanding to enrich the data. I aim to be alert to the inevitable issues of power embedded within my research, both in terms of what emerges from the data and in my own constructions of the unfolding action and its implications. I used keywords to select the threads for my data, for example, so my power to decide is there as a start. There are also power relations between students and lecturers (and I also am a lecturer) so my ‘power’ issues towards students cannot be completely removed. There are also power issues around the larger societal structures of University and Higher Education in the UK as a whole. I accept that a completely naïve view cannot be taken. However, by starting with the data, I see how issues around power and vulnerability do unfold and I did not start by pre-defining analytic categories for my data. The categories, that are in the analytical chapters emerged from a bottom-up, Potter-esque approach. The reason I chose this approach was because I wanted to understand how issues concerning student online life unfold from their constructed worlds and as far as possible, not my own.

2.4.2 The value of DP in relation to psychology as a discipline

We now turn to why DP is a valuable perspective to use in analysing student identities on Facebook. DP, according to Friesen (2009, p.3) is a ‘post-cognitive’ psychology and has the ability to overturn the accepted psychological research norm theoretically and methodologically. The accepted and dominant norm is cognitive psychology. Cognitive psychology is useful in that it can provide us with statistics and generalise behaviours, helping us to understand areas such as memory, attention and perception. Cognitive psychology began as partly a reaction against behaviourism in psychology. Behaviourism focused on analysing what could be observed, quantitatively, arguing that we can only research what we see. Cognitive psychology, in opposition, investigates what is going on ‘inside the head’.

Some may argue that DP is like behaviourism, in that it does not look at the internal. However, there is a key difference, in that behaviourists set aside psychological concerns. DP, on the other hand, investigates how psychological concerns are created and managed in discourse.
Over time, cognitive dominance in psychology has persisted. It is a powerful area of psychology utilising, mostly, the experimental paradigm. According to Billig (2012) the perspective has been kept strong by the ‘academic capitalism’ of contemporary society, meaning that academia has become a market-driven entity, something he vehemently disagrees with. Market forces mean that in psychology at least, methods such as discourse analysis and DP have been marginalized in favour of more ‘rigorous’, quantitative research because they are less quantifiable. However, this dominance in quantitative psychology (questionnaires, quantified interviews, vignettes and quantified focus group data) has created problems, according to discursive psychologists (Potter and Edwards, 2003). A major issue is that these methods mean the reality and understanding of a given (often mundane) interaction is stripped of context. By using DP, previous research on Facebook that has been done experimentally, or cognitively can be revisited with these issues at the forefront.

Furthermore, one of DP’s core values, as previously mentioned, lies in the nature of the data used. Data is naturally occurring, as far as is practically possible. To illustrate some of the problems with data gathered in the laboratory, we can draw on Gibson’s (2014) paper on the famous Milgram (1963) experiment, which illuminates that some people will obey an authority figure and give someone electric shocks, even though these shocks may lead to death. Milgram’s analysis suggested that participants obeyed the experimenter because he was a figure of authority, however, Gibson highlighted that often participants did not straightforwardly obey but used discursive strategies to try and remove themselves from the experiment, often before the experimenter had even followed the scripted ‘prods’ (the ‘standardised’ method used to encourage participants to continue). This suggests that the experimenter was not necessarily an authority figure as claimed by Milgram, but one who was there to negotiate the continuation of the experiment. The experimental situation was not reflective of everyday obedience and therefore, it could be inaccurate to extend the findings to political atrocities (such as the holocaust). This example demonstrates the problems with using unrealistic environments and extrapolating the findings to the ‘real world’. CA branches of DP also argue that the ‘false situation’ of interviews means they are specific discursive situations and worthy of investigation as a research method in their own right from a discursive perspective, rather than reflective of a participant’s beliefs and thoughts.

In terms of sampling, the focus is on ‘normative practice’ (Potter, 2012 p. 445). Normally, a psychologist would choose a type of sampling — say random or convenience, but because the majority of the population communicates through discourse then using what is there is deemed appropriate. Sampling is not required in the same way, because researchers are not attempting to
statistically generalise. While it makes sense to use students if you are researching students, it does not matter if you use every ‘nth’ student or not.

DP, therefore, gives us the tools to see what is going on right in front of us with minimal interference from the researcher (Edwards, 2012). In practice previous discursive research has achieved this by investigating discourse on family mealtimes (taped discussions with no researcher present) (Wiggins, 2013); therapy sessions (Auburn and Lea, 2003) and child protection helplines (Potter and Hepburn, 2003) which are all naturally occurring (discursive) situations. DP asserts there is no need to strip discourse of its natural interaction in order to understand how we communicate.

Therefore, another reason it makes sense to use this methodological approach in my research, is that I am also using naturally occurring data. I did not take part in the forum I used for my data and the students did not know their discourse would be used for analysis during their discussions, although they were made aware of this after the module was completed and their permission was sought (see discussion on ethics in the method (section 3.5)). As I am interested in how students perform identity out of the official academic environment in their own natural communities, it is appropriate to use a research method and theory that can investigate the issue without researcher interference. It lets us see what students are really doing in their ‘own worlds’.

2.4.3 Critique of DP

It is important to examine the limitations of DP, so the scope of my research can be understood. DP has been criticised in several ways. Firstly, that cognition is ignored and secondly that the bodily experience of emotion is ignored. Thirdly, it has been accused of not being scientific; that cause and effect is not taken into consideration. Also, some believe that qualitative research is only of use when it leads to quantitative research. Finally, it has been critiqued on the grounds that it is subjective and ignores real-life experience.

One of the main aspects of DP that is misunderstood is around cognition (Wiggins, 2017). DP does not claim that cognition does not exist, just that we do not have appropriate tools to access and analyse it. We can only focus on what is accessible. In psychological research, using language to uncover what is going on cognitively, is problematic. So, cognition is ‘set aside’ and instead, analysed as a topic displayed in discourse — we use cognitive discourses (‘I think’, ‘I believe’, ‘I remember’) to
convince, blame and argue. My research is examining what is happening on the surface of Facebook and not what lies underneath, focusing on how cognitive discourses are used in written interaction.

The way DP deals with emotion has been criticised too, with some claiming emotion is beyond the scope of discourse (Potter, 2012). Like cognition, DP argues we use discourses of fear, anger and happiness for purpose. Emotion is not treated as a physical or cognitive state but as a discursive resource. DP does not dispute emotion exists in some physical sense, but that discourse is not a reliable tool to use to describe and understand that physical emotion. Instead, we can examine, as I do in my research, the emotional language used, such as ‘stress’ and ‘panic’.

Criticisms have also been raised by Jahoda (2012), who questions the ‘scientific’ and ‘rigorous’ nature of DP. In contrast, Potter (2012) explains it may be more inductive than the scientific method, but its methodology fits its purpose. It is not in opposition to, but different from the traditional scientific method. Similarly, DP has been criticised for not attending to cause and effect (Manstead, 2008). Potter (2012) claims it is ridiculous to ignore DP as useful because it does not focus on causality from a scientific perspective. For my purposes, doing research from a traditional scientific perspective would not give me the information I need for my study. I am not looking at what causes students to behave the way they do on forums and how these ‘causes’ impact on their studies. I am looking at how they interact and how this is intertwined with certain discursive reactions. This will demonstrate the positions and identities that are drawn on and created, in order to give insight into students’ interactional work in a forum. These can then be applied to allow students to become informed of what is done and how discourse works in a student forum.

Furthermore, is the argument that qualitative methods are only useful as precursors to quantitative methods (Manstead, 2008) and are not rigorous enough to stand alone to scientific scrutiny. Potter (2012) claims that in terms of practice, this is not the case and that very few social psychology experiments are based on qualitative research. He further explains that DP is generalisable (if not in the same way as quantitative research) per se and not how this information can lead to experimental research. On a similar note, using DP in ‘mixed methods’ is tricky. Caution is advised because it can lead to ‘epistemic confusion’ (Wiggins and Potter, 2007, p.86). DP works on a different epistemological level than most other psychological perspectives and there is often a clash between perspectives in beliefs of how we can know what we know (epistemology). If these different levels of analysis are not considered, then analysis may be flawed.
In a further argument, Jahoda (2012) asserts DP is subjective and therefore validity can be called into question. However, validity can be gained by demonstrating methods of integrity where arguments and analysis are grounded in data. Wiggins and Potter (2007) explain that discourse is valid in itself because this is what we use in everyday life and in DP, valid interpretations can be checked with other DP researchers, the next-turn proof procedure and via deviant cases.

Finally, phenomenological analysts (those who believe that what people say can genuinely reveal experiences) have critiqued DP for not focussing enough on actual experience. Potter (2012) argues that because DP focuses on discursive orientations unfolding in real time it cannot help but uncover experience, or ‘capture this linguistic theatre of self’ (Potter, 2012, p.12). In an interview situation, which phenomenologists tend to use, it is unlikely that ‘truth’ can be revealed, given that the talk is orientated to the interview research situation. It is argued it is far better to look at how experience is used discursively. This sits well with the purpose of my research.

The key message here is that DP posits an alternative to more traditional psychological approaches. What it can do is investigate discourse as it unfolds, and for my purposes, address what it means to be a student in this particular forum, at this particular time. It is a powerful method and theory which has the ability to investigate the practices students use to construct themselves in particular ways.

2.5 Affordances

We can now turn to the affordances online interaction offers and link these to my research. Applying DP to internet data is relatively new (Wiggins, 2017), so guidance on analysing online affordances is limited. As DP was initially a model designed for spoken and written interaction, applying the model to written online chat could be challenging. This section will look at some of these affordances including: time, fluidity, audience design, flexibility and multimodality and laughter.

2.5.1 Time

Time is of relevance to my research in several ways. The way we talk about time has changed with the advent of online discussion groups. Page (2012) illustrates how we now tell stories in the present rather than in the past. In Facebook statuses, we tend to say what is happening right now, rather than then. People are building identities as they are constructed in the present, rather than talking about them after they have unfolded. DP is an ideal perspective to illuminate how students tell stories of deadline and time pressures as they are going through them.
The speed of online written communication is not the same as written communication from the past (for example, in letter writing). In terms of similarities, people could always respond instantly when receiving a message (letters could be written in response to letters as soon as they were received, for example), just like we may respond to Facebook posts. Letter responses were not necessarily received as quickly. Although there was a time in the Edwardian era where the post was delivered many times a day (Gillen, 2013) the practicalities of getting the letter from one place to another would have taken a substantial amount of delivery time, unlike the instant nature of the internet. Therefore, the pace of written interaction may be much quicker, although it could be argued people may take many days to respond to or read a message online as well.

2.5.2 Fluidity

Facebook discussion groups are both constrained and freed by fluidity. Barton and Lee (2013) remind us there are more authors and audiences in online communication compared to those in the past. Anyone can join in, making conversation fluid, or static or overlapping. Turn-taking (Giles et al., 2015) is not necessarily linear: many people may reply to an internet post and many people can see it. Many could always reply to written communication — for example, a newspaper article — but there would not be lots of people writing about the same article, in one place, for everyone to read, whenever they were available, like there is in a Facebook thread. A Facebook thread can be seen as an ‘article’ with multiple voices responding to and (re)constructing the article at the same time. Also, text can be written and re-written infinitely. Information changes and disappears quickly and spontaneously and can reappear just as quickly. Barton and Lee (2013) question where the interface between reading and writing begins and ends online — when on instant messenger, for example, we are often simultaneously interacting through type and reading at the same time. The online world is the opposite of linear communication: you could liken it to neurons in a brain, where multiple connections are constantly moving and adjusting. DP is an ideal perspective to use in investigating this complex interactive world. It can investigate the subtleties and micro-analytic details of overlapping discourse.

2.5.3 Audience design

Participants in conversation construct their messages for an audience (consciously or unconsciously). Pre-mass internet use, a message would have been written for a specific audience, and rarely read by
anyone other than that audience. Now, anyone online can write a message which can be read by anyone who has access to the internet: perhaps more people than the writer intended or expected. Vasquez's (2013) research into TripAdvisor draws on the idea of communicating with an ‘unknown’ audience (although (my note) it should be noted that TripAdvisor is often linked with Facebook, which in turn tells you which ‘friends’ are on TripAdvisor, so it is possible that people may be writing in this knowledge).

The term ‘audience design’ suggests people usually manage what is appropriate to post where and take into consideration who may read their posts. Facebook highlights a new problem in terms of context collapse. Messages on Facebook forums are not received by a specific audience, for example, as would be the case in a letter or a one-to-one text message but instead by an audience of friends, associates and those from our past, simultaneously. This idea is taken from Bell’s model (1984, cited in Seargeant and Tagg, 2014, p.161) which claims people send messages with three audiences in mind — the addressee, the auditor and those who overhear. Similarly, friends on Facebook are not always the same as offline friends (Page, 2012). In my study I do not know which students have met face-to-face but as my participants are distance-learning students, we can assume a substantial number of them have not. This situation has implications for audience and DP can shed light on how we construct identities through this frequently shifting way of interacting, although it is beyond the scope of the method to explore who the messages are intended for.

Facebook users can engage in micro-blogging (Lee, 2011). Micro-blogging (small written extracts of events and emotions recorded as they happen) is different from blogging, which is more like a public diary. Micro-blogging is the status updating people engage in in (often) day-to-day life on Facebook. Lee (2011) illustrates this with a case-study of a pregnant woman who takes her audience through her day-to-day experiences of pregnancy. An example is when she starts her ‘story’ of pregnancy with ‘Peggy is pregnant!’ and when she was having the baby as ‘@hospital’ (Lee, 2011, p.3). This is a high-tellability story, which grabs the audience (Ochs and Capps, 2001) as opposed to low-tellability stories (Ochs and Capps, 2001). Low-tellability stories are more mundane than high-tellability ones. Page (2012) argues that when constructing an update, people need to make sure it is of low enough tellability that you do not overly reveal, but high enough in terms of rhetorical style to grab attention. However, she found no correlation between style of post and amount of interaction.
The concept of ‘face-saving’ is related to how people design posts for their audiences (Lemert and Branaman, 1997), as previously mentioned under the discussion on Goffman. Saving ‘face’ is something people do both on and offline, but there may be differences in the two contexts. Not everyone may choose to face-save (i.e., trolls (Hardaker, 2013) who are people who are deliberately antagonistic). Golder and Donath (2004), in their observational analysis of usenet participants identified several roles in an online community: ‘celebrity’, ‘ranter’, ‘lurkers’, ‘flamers’, ‘trolls’ and ‘newbies’, showing that face-saving is more appropriate for some posters than others. Most of us, Santamaria-Garcia (2013, p.137-8) argues, ‘behind the computer...hide character traits we do not like and idealise our virtues by means of our discourse and pictures’. In her social network research, which focused on 200 university students’ interaction, she claimed that if we are engaging in ‘face-saving’ activity, as defined by Brown and Levinson, (1987, p.61) people project ‘the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself’. DP can investigate how these audience design features are used to construct the intricacies of ‘face-saving’ (or otherwise) and how this connects to student construction of identity.

2.5.4 Flexibility and multimodality

DP can also examine flexible and multimodal aspects of interaction. Online communication is more flexible than written communication in terms of modality. Multimodality is increasingly popular in social media usage and therefore, as Highfield and Lever (2016) argue, cannot be ignored. They argue multimodality has always been there, but it is becoming more and more complex and multifaceted. Examples of multimodality used in Facebook include emoji, GIFs (files that show short films/ animations), memes (a humorous picture with text) and selfies (photos of oneself). Online communication cannot use the ‘tools’ we are used to in verbal communication like tone, facial expressions and body language. Instead we use text manipulation, emoticons, acronyms and punctuation and the ‘like’ button (introduced to Facebook in 2008). Santamaria-Garcia (2013) revealed that people do not just use ‘like’ to express a positive response to a post but to agree or disagree with someone and to save typing. It can be used as a ‘nodding’ action to continue conversation. In February 2016, Facebook introduced new emoji for use alongside the ‘like’ button, which may alter the uses of ‘like’ on Facebook, but research on this still has to emerge. These new ways of communication fit with the high-speed, instant, online lives we lead.

From the research, Ferguson (2012) agrees it is not enough to focus on the words written in forums in order to understand communication holistically. Ferguson (2012) argues there is usefulness in
looking at other affordances, such as layout and colour as well as text. I decided affordances such as those outlined above need examining for a full picture of my research. One example of analysing such affordances is from Deumert (2014) who investigated Facebook data from a young South African woman who was sending birthday wishes. She likened the construction of 'birthday cakes' through computer characters to the Bakhtinian idea of carnival. Deumert (2014, p.42) argues this shows people are constructing their identity 'not only as someone who is fun, playful and creative, but also as someone who is familiar with the genre and the potential freedoms such informal spaces can offer to the expression of the self'.

By applying DP to multimodality, I investigate how these multimodal elements are used in the forum to further construct and build identity. Emoji, as a recently explosive affordance on social media, is part of this and that is where this discussion now turns.

2.5.5  Emoji

In the process of doing this research, emoji use has exploded on Facebook. An emoji is a picture, such as 😊 (a unicode graphic symbol (Kralj Novak et al., 2015)). These symbols do not only show emotion in pictures, but also represent items (Kralj Novak et al., 2015) such as sunshine, plants, flags and activities. Some people are even referring to emoticons (this was the commonly used word for text-based emoji, such as :-) before emoji was commonly used) as part of a new language, independent of standard English (Garrison et al., 2011). Emoji was designed by Kurita in 1999 (Japanese Shigetaka Kurita, The man who created the Digital Hieroglyphics or better known as Emoji Characters, 2016). In August 2015, there were 1281 unicode 8.0 emoji (Karlj Novak et al., 2015). According to emojipedia.com (Burge, 2018), there are currently 2823 emoji (dated June, 2018). In February 2016, Facebook introduced new ‘reaction’ emoji so that instead of just ‘liking’ a post, you can love, laugh, wow, be sad, angry or care. Emoji are also used in Facebook threads.

As emoji is a useful and productive tool in social media, which is growing all the time, I decided it was important to cover this in my research. In February 2015, when I did my initial search on emoji, only 10 papers appeared. A search in July, 2018, revealed 504 papers. More research has been done into emoticons, which is not surprising as they have been around longer, and, as they are similar to emoji, it is useful to outline them here. Emoji differ from emoticons. Emoticons are the typed symbols used for emotion in text and talk (:-)). In 2012, Page showed emoticon use (particularly among females aged 30-39) was increasing while intensifier (????!!!) use was decreasing. It is likely that emoji use is
more popular now than emoticon use, as predictive text automatically changes emoticons into emoji. My research draws on the use of emoji throughout the analysis and links it to building identity.

Evidence suggests social media users like emoji. Kralj Novak et al., (2015) examined how the use of emoji affected ‘emotional contagion’ on Twitter. They gathered 700,000 tweets from 13 different languages across Europe and asked native speakers of those languages to code them for positive or negative sentiment. They found tweets with emojis were coded significantly more positively than those without. Similarly, Huang et al., (2008) investigated the effect of emoticons on perceived information richness, perceived usefulness, personal interaction and enjoyment by administering a questionnaire to 216 students in the US. They found that the use of emoticons was associated with pleasure and enjoyment and that people had an enhanced experience of instant messenger when they used emoticons. Using emoticons (and by extension, emoji) helps people interpret (and sometimes misinterpret) messages.

There is debate over how emoticons and emoji should be analysed. Some (Antonijevic, 2005; Krohn, 2004) suggest that the use of emoticons is an alternative to non-verbal cues in face-to-face communication to let us know how the writer is feeling. Others (Derks et al., 2008) agree with this but also claim emoticons can be used for humour and message enhancement. Through their experiment on participant responses to a fictional situation — liking or disliking a curry recipe posted online — they showed in the negative condition, people were less likely to use emoticons. Further manipulations showed people are likely to use more emoticons with friends than strangers. DP would see emoji as an action and not reflective of underlying states.

Kaye et al., (2016) asked 92 first year psychology undergraduate students to fill in a questionnaire collecting both quantitative and qualitative data on emoticon use across email, social networks and texting. The results revealed three themes that account for emoticon use: ‘aiding personal expression’, ‘reducing ambiguity of discourse’ and ‘appropriateness of context’ (Kaye et al., 2016, p. 463). It was seen as less appropriate to use emoticons in emails than the other two platforms and with university staff. Kaye et al., (2016) concluded that people carefully consider their use of emoticon. This creates a major problem if we consider emoticons as simply direct replacements for facial expressions. Similarly, Vandergriff (2013) explains that a ‘smiley’ is not simply a reflection of joy or happiness. In Vandergriff’s study where advanced foreign language students of German took part in a moral dilemma task, micro-analysis of the smiley showed how it was used — to show an
appreciation for humour and to ‘do’ disagreement in a non-aggressive way. My research builds on these studies, by examining how emoji is used in identity construction.

2.5.6 Acronyms, humour and laughter

Emoji can be used to demonstrate humour, as can other paralinguistic features, such as acronyms and laughter tokens (such as ‘haha’ and ‘hehe’). There is a difference between laughter and humour, however and the two should not be used interchangeably. People may use laughter to build and respond to humour, but laughter may also be used for other purposes (Glenn and Holt, 2016). Potter and Hepburn (2010) argue in spoken interaction, laughter particles (such as ‘haha’ and ‘hee hee’) can sometimes be used to indicate spoken ‘trouble’ or to modify what people are trying to do with their talk, rather than a straightforward link to humour. The discussion will now move to examining what research has been done into students and humour as well as CA research into humour more generally.

Some research has looked at student use of humour on Facebook, particularly self-deprecating humour (Ask and Abidin, 2018). Through content analysis and a grounded theory approach, Ask and Abidin looked at how students used memes to build collective identities of students in a Facebook group. They identified three themes: ‘overwhelmed, stressed and anxious’, ‘self-deprecating humour, flexibility and seriousness’ and ‘procrastination, control and self-blame’ (Ask and Abidin, 2018, p.837). They argue that humour is cathartic for students, but also that through self-deprecating humour, student problems (and the severity of them) are highlighted. They partially blame the neoliberal academic system and ascertain students are pressurised over the fear of a future life without a degree.

Prior to Ask and Abidin’s (2018) research, Ong’onda et al., (2013) researched student Facebook accounts to examine use of paralinguistic features from a computer-mediated discourse analysis perspective. They analysed 300 posts and found the following (see figure 3):
This graph shows that emoticons were the most frequently used prosodic feature, closely followed by laughter tokens. Ong’onda et al., (2013) concluded that emoticons were used to add to the posts’ meaning and replace some aspects of non-verbal communication. Similarly, ‘haha’ and its variants (hehe and lol) were also used extensively. The research showed ‘haha’ could be used as positively to show laughter, but also ironically, and ‘hehe’ more as ‘giggling’. They also showed how punctuation is used. Many exclamation marks in a row were used for extreme exaggeration and many full stops were used (they argue) to show ‘thinking time’ and replace words that the user cannot access, or to show an incomplete utterance. They also looked at elongated vowels and concluded that these were used to enhance written emotion (such as disappointment or happiness). It can be seen then, that laughter tokens and other aspects of prosody are a frequent resource used in written interaction which further adds to my understanding that ignoring this in my data would be a mistake as it can add to the richness and depth of my analysis.

Therefore, my research was also interested in how students used laughter and humour to build community but from a discursive psychology approach instead of those used above. Instead of
classifying how prosody is used, I examine how it is used. I was interested in how laughter tokens, such as ‘haha’ and ‘hehehe’ or laughter emoji were used to construct humour (or not). To do this, I drew on the above and work into CA and laughter. Most of this work has been on spoken, rather than written discourse. Humour is of interest to discursive psychologists and CA analysts because the way it is used is complex and CA can illuminate some of these complexities. CA has shown how humour can be used to align or misalign with others and that people may not always recognise when another is using humour. Drew’s (1987) work, for example, demonstrated how using humour in conversation isn’t always aligned to as humour. The example used is po-faced responses to teasing. This is when someone responds seriously to being teased, instead of going along with a joke. Sometimes, Drew argued, people do not even realise they are being teased or they may ignore a tease. Furthermore, Drew found that discourse that leads to teasing tends to be because of complaining, showing off or ranting about something.

Holt’s (2010; 2011) work on spoken humour and laughter demonstrates that the link between humour and laughter is not a stimulus-response one, but more complex and an interactional accomplishment. Holt’s (2010) paper investigated laughter as a closing resource and demonstrated laughter could be used to signal to participants that a conversational topic is ready to end. Furthermore, she demonstrated that in troubles-telling sequences it may be acceptable for someone to laugh at their own problems but not for others to join in. The same can occur with self-deprecatory humour. In addition, in her 2011 paper, Holt noticed that laughter appears to follow dramatic figurative language and that if people laugh at something funny, the next turn will sometimes be an upgrade of the previous invitation to laugh, which invites the recipient to laugh again. If something that is intended to be laughable is not laughed at, someone may invite the recipient to have a second chance to laugh by laughing themselves. However, Holt concedes that it is necessary to investigate the conversation as a whole rather than just turn after turn, as the laughter may be a response to a previous conversational aspect and this may also account for laughter occurring at unexpected points.

Clearly, there will be some similarities in how laughter and humour are used, between offline spoken and online interaction and my research illuminates some of these similarities and differences. Previous research has shown that pressure and stress can result in the use of humour (Beach and Prickett, 2017), that humour can also be used to divert from stress (Bihn, 1995, cited in Beach and Prickett, 2017, p.792), and when good and bad news is given and received (Maynard, 2003 cited in Beach and Prickett, 2017, p.792). Assessment is a stressful situation, as is receiving poor grades, so we
can see that there is a relationship here between serious situations and use of laughter. Beach and Prickett (2017), for example, looked at 75 interactions between cancer patients and 30 doctors. The interaction between patients and doctors may be stressful and doctors will be the deliverers of potentially good and bad news. It was shown that humour was drawn on to deal with difficult topics to do with their illness. Doctors, however, did not always share the laughter presented by the patient and it is argued that this is because the interaction is not inviting the doctor to laugh. Rather, the patient is laughing at the self. In one example, laughter was used to reassure the doctor that the participant had not meant a previous reference to a more serious disease (in this case lymphoma) and hence ease the confusion of the situation. If awkward situations arose and a patient laughed, doctors tended to ask a question to move discourse on. It was also found that when the doctors did laugh it was just before a new topic was introduced (which is similar to Holt’s (2010) research above). However, not all cancer interactions between doctors and patients were problematic. Patients also laughed when justifying being well and to show they were unique.

There are clear power relations in a patient-doctor relationship and laughter use may be connected to this sense of power. Another power relationship connected more closely to my research, is the teacher-student relationship. It has been shown that humour is a resource in the classroom, used to manage uncertainty (Looney and Kim, 2018). Looney and Kim (2018) investigated the initiation-response-feedback pattern in the classroom concluding that this pattern oversimplifies what actually happens in classroom conversation. Students often disrupt the expected pattern with humour because they do not have an answer – and they do this to mitigate face-threats in front of the ‘powerful teacher’. Teachers tend to affiliate with the humour, and it could be argued this ‘levels’ the power relationship.

My research is privileged in that it can get around power relationships like this. Instead of looking at doctor-patient, or lecturer-student relationships, the power relationships in my research are less delineated. That is not to say there are no power relationships at all, just that these are not culturally linear like they are in research into doctor-patient or teacher-student relationships. This means that instead of finding out how students interact in the classroom, such as Looney and Kim’s (2018) research, the focus is out of the classroom and into a peer-peer online forum.

Research into identity and humour from peer-peer relationships has, however, been studied from a discursive psychological and membership categorisation analysis approach. Once again, the focus was on spoken conversation, rather than online interaction. Robles (2019) found masculine identity and
belonging in a group of men, was enforced through humour. Taking data from a group of men talking and interacting over 2008-2011, Robles investigated ‘tearing down’ which is when a series of nonserious insults are used to demonstrate group belonging. She found that the participants made fun of each other and marginalized acts that did not conform to the group’s shared understanding of masculinity. For example, the men teased each other on nationality and not being able to hold their drink, doing white-collar jobs (which were constructed as ‘selling out’) and if they liked music which didn’t fit the group’s masculine norms. They did this by using insults. Putting up with the insults of not actually complying to the group norms is argued to be part of the masculine identity. They also dressed up in women’s clothes and exaggerated their performance of this role, which led to a (humorous) challenging of masculinity. The researcher argues that the purpose of this teasing is to create and keep an in-group consistent with its own moral norms.

My research could not find any CA/DP literature used to look at laughter on Facebook. However, I did find Petitjean and Morel’s (2017) research, which showed that in WhatsApp (an application like Facebook messenger), laughter is used as a resource to close and manage interaction, similar findings to Holt’s (2010) and Beach and Prickett’s (2017) research. Petitjean and Morel (2017) used CA and some quantitative analysis and examined 43 conversations, looking at sequencing and turn taking. They found that depending on the position and organisation of the laughter, participants oriented to it in different ways. One pattern was: a laughter token, followed by another message by the same speaker, which includes an assessment, and then topic closure. Another pattern found was when the message has both the laughter token and the assessment together. This tended to lead to a continuation of topic. The authors argue that laughter is useful in showing how participants display an identity of technological expertise when using WhatsApp. They also found that laughter alone occurs more often than shared laughter. They concluded that some aspects of face-to-face and WhatsApp interactions are similar, such as when people make assessments then use a laughter token to show they are treating the previous turn as non-serious. People also use overdone figurative phrases and exaggerate, again, a similar finding to Holt (2010).

Petitjean and Morel (2017) also note that there has been little research into laughter from a CA approach on CMC (computer mediated communication). They did find some research from discourse approaches which showed that lol is a discourse marker used for irony (Uygur-Distexhe, 2012, cited in Petitjean and Morel, 2017, p.3) or may be used instead of punctuation (Michot 2007, cited in Petitjean and Morel, 2017, p.3). From a quantitative approach, Tagliamonte and Denis (2008 cited in
Petitjean and Morel, 2017, p.3) found that haha is used more often than lol and hehe, and that 15-16 year olds use lol, whereas 19-20 year olds use haha.

I am examining how laughter tokens are used to convince, complain, account for, argue and build a sense of community. As has been shown above, CA (and DP) would question how far we can assume, for example, that many full stops represent someone thinking and that ‘haha’ is reflecting a state of laughter or irony, but we can show how such prosodic features work. Therefore, one aspect of my research looks at what students in a Facebook forum do with laughter and asks how it is reciprocated or not. This will build on the extensive literature into spoken laughter tokens and CA and the limited research into laughter and CMC.

2.5.7 Using questions to offer support and advice

One other affordance offered by support forums is the use of questions. Questions can be a useful tool in offering advice. Butler et al., (2010) researched advice giving in children’s phone helplines and identified two types of questions: advice-implementing interrogatives and advice-relevant interrogatives. Advice-implementing interrogatives are questions that suggest actions a client might take. Minimising is often used so that the suggestion is managed gently. Advice-relevant interrogatives are different - they ask whether a client has tried a previous course of action before calling. Yet again, questions are carefully worded and softened with phrases such as ‘have you tried...’. The questions are designed to manage a problem. Butler et al.’s (2010) research demonstrated how advice was given carefully, giving the child the power to decide what advice was relevant. The advice worked by focusing on what the client knows and understands. This is relevant to my research as problem management is a major part of the forum.

2.5.8 Section conclusion

Garrison et al., (2011) claim using talk-related models for internet written language is problematic. However, some of the examples above show us that this can be done. Facebook communication is not just the written word, but a mix of talk, written and particular affordances and this can enrich and extend, rather than problematise talk-related models. As Darics (2013) argues, it is not possible to assume that an aspect of prosody being used for a particular function can be generalised because every interaction is individual and context bound so examining specific interactions are important to illuminate the patterns and exceptions that exist in CMC and laughter.
I will now develop further why researching student identities in Facebook forums is a valuable enterprise by outlining previous research into groups, online research into discursive psychology and identity, Facebook research, and student identities.

2.6 Groups, identity and Interaction

The literature review has looked at how different affordances are used in online communication and related literature. It now turns to investigating groups and interaction, and in particular reviewing the literature around CA/DP and support forums. My research investigates students performing identity in an online group without formal tutor presence. Research has shown that participants in forums who fail to adhere to implicit rules made by the members tend to be rejected (King and Moreggi, 1998). Group rules and norms are of interest to this research because online groups, although different than face-to-face groups (i.e. the group may be dispersed geographically and may not have ever met face-to-face) are still subject to implicit rules and these are expected to be adhered to. This is especially interesting in the context of unofficial OU Facebook groups, which are still expected to stick to OU rules (especially around areas of assessment) (The Open University, 2017). This links to Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) Social Identity Theory and Lewin’s (1948) findings that group cohesion is due to a drive towards similar goals and that anyone who does not desire the same goals may be rejected. In practice, group behaviour is rarely this simple, as this research demonstrates.

Similarly, groups may be seen as communities of practice (Barton and Lee, 2013). A community of practice is one where people discuss mutual interests and use discourse that is connected to that interest. Chau and Lee (2017) argue Facebook forums are communities of practice because they are a space where people meet to work towards a similar outcome. However, such communities of practice are not tension-free. Ferguson et al., (2013) examined two groups of teenage students interacting in an online forum, one from the USA and one from the UK. By using the sociocultural perspective of discourse as mediated interaction, they found that register was an issue in creating difficulties in communication. UK students, who had been the initial participants in the forum, wanted to discuss their project while the US students (who joined later) were more interested in assessment and using the forum for assessment purposes. The US students used a more educational register and the UK students rejected this.
2.6.1 Identity

Vasquez (2013) explains that research into identity work mostly focuses on user profiles, but as shall become obvious, it is clear that identity work is not only being done in user profiles, but also in the messages people type in forums. According to Antaki and Widdecombe (1998) there are five principles of identity. These are: that categorising someone should be possible; that this category is fluid; that identity should be made relevant to participants’ talk; that analysts should only draw on identity when participants make it relevant; and that when doing identity, talk is structured in particular ways. Some of the different examples of identity research from a broadly CA approach include Edwards’ (1998) research into relationships, McKinlay and Dunnet’s (1998) research into gun ownership and Widdecombe’s (1998) research into punks and goths. It should be noted these are not online studies but are still relevant because they offer insight into CA/DP research and identity. Edwards argues, via the example of a couple in a relationship, that categories are used in talk to manage and work up identity. The categories of ‘girls’ and ‘women’ for example, were used to justify the behaviour of a husband and wife. The husband referred to his wife being out with the ‘girls’ which suggests playful and flighty, in comparison to the wife’s construction of the same group as ‘married women’ which positions the women as sensible, faithful and reasonable. Both McKinlay and Dunnet (1998) and Widdecombe (1998) showed how those that own a gun, and those who look like goths or punks construct themselves as ordinary and like everybody else. They also explicated how identities are fluid. For example, in McKinlay and Dunnet’s (1998) research, ‘everyone’ owned a gun and using a gun was ‘reasonable’ if it was for a matter of protection. Others who used a gun, such as criminals and violent offenders, may not be classed as reasonable, if they were not in a reasonable-gun-using-environment. Therefore, the construction of being a gun owner is fluid.

2.6.2 Online research into identity and support forums using DP and related theories

There has been extensive discourse-related research into identity construction in online support forums (although not specifically on Facebook) and this is where the discussion now turns. This is relevant to my EdD as the students in my research are engaging in support work in their forum, but on Facebook rather than message board forums. This section of the literature review will at look support forums on: suicide (Horne and Wiggins, 2009, Wiggins et al., 2016); depression (Lamerichs and te Molder, 2003, Morrow, 2006); self-harm (Smithson et al., 2011); bipolar disorder (Varyeda and Antaki, 2009); cancer (Seymour-Smith, 2013); eating disorders (Stommel and Meijam, 2011, Stommel and Koole, 2010); bariatric surgery (Cranwell and Seymour-Smith, 2012); medication and
aspartame (Versteeg et al., 2018); gambling (Mudry and Strong, 2013) and grief (Paulus and Varga, 2015). Firstly, research on openings to forum posts will be examined, followed by responses to openings and then closings. These do, of course, overlap in places.

Some background may be useful in order to contextualise the discussion. Lamerichs and te Molder’s (2003) work was probably the first paper to investigate support forums and CMC from a discursive psychological perspective. They uncovered that people’s identity work in a forum on depression was contradictory: participants would position themselves as in control of their feelings but also claim they were out of control so that they were accepted into the forum. Posters constructed themselves as both competent and incompetent at different times which worked to ask for and offer help and support. This overall pattern of shifting identity depending on the function of the discourse is seen throughout these papers.

Openings to forum threads have been extensively researched. Stommel and Meijman (2010) who studied eating disorder support forums, found the newcomer addressed the community as a group, but the group addressed the newcomer as a single person. Studying a ‘newbie’ to a forum, Benwell and Stokoe (2006) argue identity is constructed in relation to interaction, by using discourse and affordances like those outlined in the previous section. The research shows that people online can invoke their own category as the ‘newbie’ calls himself a ‘newbie’. It also concludes that, with the use of self-deprecating behaviour, the ‘newbie’ is doing cautious discursive interaction and that identity is something one does online and not something that one is.

Morrow (2006) found openings to threads could be quite systematic. He examined 85 threads of problem-stating messages in a forum on depression, as well as advice-giving and responses. Most opening posts consisted of an opening, a description of symptoms and a closing. When writing about problems, many posters started with a vague statement and metaphor was frequently deployed. Being vague was also seen in Horne and Wiggins’ (2009) research, which demonstrated that initial posters in a suicide forum needed to work up an authentic, rational identity as suicidal, and of extreme mental anguish, but keep imminent threat vague. Posters claimed that their suicide plans were justified. Using extreme, uncontrollable emotional states and unusual stories were also common in Varga and Paulus’ (2013) paper into grief forums. They looked at how discourses constructed both grief and the identity of ‘mourner’. Once again, posters had to use extreme stories (of grief) to justify their presence in the forum, hence constructing an identity of genuine griever. Posters did not ask for help but told of their troubles. Grief was constructed as both extreme, all-
encompassing and as something that never goes. One way to gain support was to claim that no-one else could understand the grief the person was experiencing.

A similar pattern can be found in Seymour-Smith’s (2013) discursive analysis of a testicular cancer online support forum. Like Horne and Wiggins’ (2009) and Varga and Paulus’ (2013) research, participants had to work up an identity of being accountable to being on the forum in the first place. Mark, for example, justifies his position of being unsure of whether to get an implant or not, by drawing on his doctor’s and girlfriend’s voices. He again claims that he is rational. Seymour-Smith (2013) shows how this post is built up to protect stake and identity. People work to avoid being accused of not having an appropriate identity to partake in the forum. Humour was also used.

Similarly, building an identity of genuinely entitled to use a support forum on gambling was demonstrated by Mudry and Strong (2013) who took a discourse analytic approach, drawing on discursive psychology and investigated how common discourses of addiction were used in a Canadian online forum. The identity of recovering problem gambler took part in three stages: discourses of addiction and illness were used when problem gamblers entered the forum. This was then followed by stories and discourses of shame, guilt and addiction. Through vivid description and extreme case formulations (ECFs)9 (Pomerantz, 1986, explains that these usually appear in ‘troubled’ accounts) the posters constructed themselves as genuine addicts. People then used discourses of control/ responsibility and addiction and illness to position themselves as being in recovery.

There has also been research into opening posts by Varyeda and Antaki (2009) who researched a bipolar disorder forum using CA. They critiqued Lamerichs and te Molder’s (2003) study for not looking at turn-by-turn interaction. The initial posts in this forum were from people who were working through the new identity of bipolar disorder. A poster tended to ask for help, but not advice. Initial posts were usually full of ECFs. Varyeda and Antaki (2009) point out that these first post requests tended to be ‘easy’ and not ask for difficult information. This ‘ticket of entry’ (Sacks, 1992, pp. 257-258) was responded to and people were affiliated with and welcomed to the forum.

Closely related to health research is discursive/ CA work into food and support forums. Stommel and Meijman’s (2011) research and Stommel and Koole’s (2010) work on CA and membership categorisation analysis looked at interaction in joining and offering support in an eating disorder

9 An extreme case formulation is when discourse is taken to the extreme, for example using always or never or everyone when it is not the case. These are often used to bolster argument.
forum. Stommel and Meijman (2011) found that first posters in an online eating disorders group presented as having a diagnosis, as if they did not, it meant they were out with the norms of the group and would not receive a response. The decision to join the group was constructed as a difficult one. People used diagnoses and medical categories to gain acceptance in the forum and align with the group. Again this ‘ticket of entry’ (Sacks, 1992, pp. 257-258), like in Varyeda and Antaki’s (2009) and Seymour-Smith’s (2013) research, for example, is apparent. A lack of diagnosis or a problematic category (i.e., binge eating disorder as opposed to bulimia/anorexia) needed to be negotiated with others in the forum. Stommel and Koole (2010) argue that this problematic acceptance is because the group is a community of practice. In one case a new member interacts with old members to show they are trying to move away from a pro-anorexia (pro-ana) identity. As the forum they were posting in was for eating disorder support, glamorising anorexia was against the forum rules, so if one was pro-ana, they were constructed as going against the norm. Other participants in the forum attempt to enforce group norms, by asking the new poster to stop going to pro-ana sites, trying to pull the initial poster into the community. The established posters invite her to be brave and join their group. The group suggested she took some time out and that she needed to decide where she wanted to be, but that she could always come back.

More opening post work has been done into medication and aspartame use. Versteeg et al., (2018) examined how people build identity in two online forums: one on ADHD medication and one on the use of aspartame by using the idiom ‘listen to your body’ (Versteeg et al., 2018, p.424). They found by using ‘listen to your body’ people constructed themselves as having rational identities (like in the suicide and depression research above) and that they did seriously understand their health, in contrast to the alternative. Posters would justify their choices as the more rational thing to do, rather than listen to science, which may be relying on funding from food companies and therefore have a vested interest. Listening to science uncritically could suggest gullibility. According to Drew and Holt (1988), idioms appear in praise and complaint sequences and in this research, people were complaining about science.

In terms of replies to messages, not everyone received a response in these forums (i.e., Morrow’s (2006) work, or Horne and Wiggins’, (2009)) but those that did, involved positive, solidarity-based messages. Replies needed to draw on certain techniques to make the reply acceptable to the initial poster. One way a replier would do this is by telling their own story (second stories) before offering advice. Second stories can be seen throughout support forum literature, including in Varyeda and Antaki’s (2009), Seymour-Smith’s (2013) and Wiggins et al.’s (2016) research. In a similar vein,
sharing and reconstructing stories was found to be a helpful practice in order to avoid problem gambling (Mudry and Strong, 2013). In Morrow’s (2006, p.543) work, replies would use the ‘I’m in the same boat’ metaphor (like a shared story) to demonstrate solidarity. Encouragement was offered by ‘you are not alone’ and ‘keep posting’ (Morrow, 2006, p.543). There were also offers of continuing help (i.e., ‘please reply’ and ‘I’ll always listen’ (Morrow, 2006, p.545)). Advice was often mitigated at the end with ‘hope some of this blurb helps’ (Morrow, 2006, p.545).

Versteeg et al. (2018) looked at the positioning of idiom such as ‘listen to your body’ (similar to ‘I’m in the same boat’ above). If idiom is used in a first assessment, the person is usually asserting moral or knowledge-based rights. This knowledge can then be upgraded or downgraded. If an idiom is used in the third position a speaker can use it to agree (called success markers). The idiom can also be used to close an argument – for example, ‘listen to your body’ can be used to demonstrate that posters must listen to their body’s own messages even though their body tells them to do different things. This develops our understanding of how people negotiate who is right and wrong when offering advice. In Seymour-Smith’s (2013) study, a culture of personal choice was also apparent. This was illustrated by one poster who told people not to get the testicular implant because he had had a bad experience. This was sanctioned, although done in a face-saving way. It was not acceptable to tell other posters what to do.

Idiom is a useful support strategy in a support forum. Versteeg et al., (2018), outlined above, link their posters ‘knowledge’ debate to health choices and neoliberalism, claiming that participants construct themselves as having a duty to be informed and that the participants use this to negotiate through ‘listening to their bodies’. This idiom also appeared in Hart and Grace’s (2000) study about women who have chronic fatigue, who claimed that by not listening to their body it led to chronic fatigue in the first place. Fredrikson et al. (2008) found the same idiom was used online when women were talking about pelvic girdle pain in pregnancy, arguing that the idiom justifies the self being unpredictable and positions women at the centre of taking care of themselves rather than the health service being in charge.

Paulus and Varga (2015) examined responses to how posters were validated and empathised with in a grief support forum. There was a distinguishable pattern where people were welcomed to a ‘club no-one wanted to join’ (Paulus and Varga, 2015, p.636) and again, ‘second stories’ were told (i.e., I lost my spouse 3 years ago’ (Paulus and Varga, 2015, p.636)) which worked to reassure people that their grief was normal. They would then receive a welcome. Even when advice was not explicitly
asked for it was offered as in Lamerichs and te Molder’s (2003) paper and Morrow’s (2006) research. Advice was extensive, from therapy, medication and even spiritualists. The researchers also noted that offered advice was in line with politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987), to avoid face-threatening acts, like in Seymour-Smith’s (2013) research. As in Morrow’s (2006) work, posters were invited to return to the group and develop their stories.

Research has also been done into weight management and how people manage changes discursively, when facing and after having bariatric surgery (Cranwell and Seymour-Smith, 2012). 284 online posts were collected over a year and demonstrated how a lack of appetite post-surgery was constructed as positive, yet also a cause for concern. One person constructed weight loss as an achievement, using ECFs to justify her assessment, like Varyeda and Antaki’s (2009) research demonstrated. The poster built up an identity as a successful post-surgery patient. The use of idiom (‘I eat because I have to and thats (sic) it’ (Cranwell and Seymour-Smith, 2012, p.875)) was used to assert she is eating because it is essential for survival, and that is the only reason. When replying and monitoring problems with weight loss, the use of idiom and the minimisation of ‘just a blip’ (Cranwell and Seymour-Smith, 2012, p.875) and second stories, again worked to reassure the participant, in this case that not losing weight is alright. When managing dramatic weight loss, participants used the ‘I don’t want to be negative but’ formulation, although not in so many words, demonstrating that weight loss discourse needs to be delicately managed. The authors argue that weight management is ‘bound up’ with the social practices of the online support group. They also used the formulation to position themselves as non-judgemental, which is similar to the use of the idiom ‘listen to your body’ in Versteeg et al., (2018, p.424). Others constructed selves as help seekers, because they were not able to eat and again claimed food was essential, rather than pleasurable to justify their position. ‘Me too’ (Cranwell and Seymour-Smith, 2012, p.876) was used in responses to normalise feelings.

Building on Horne and Wiggins’ (2009) research, Wiggins et al., (2016) investigated how members of a suicide support forum managed to distance themselves from crisis and gain help. Wiggins et al. (2016) also used a DP approach to examine how posters offered support, but they looked at the threads as a case study as opposed to individual posts, where they identified each thread as ‘owned’ by the initial poster. A common structure in responses occurred; empathy with ‘I’m sorry to hear that’; then ‘I understand’; followed by a plea not to commit suicide and then a request for further information. Posts ended with ‘words of encouragement’ (Wiggins et al., 2016, p.1245). Jefferson and Lee’s (1992) work found people rejected advice when it was not done in the right sequence or environment, suggesting in support forums patterns are constructed and attended to by posters.
Smithson et al. (2011) looked at an online forum for young people who self-harm and found similar patterns to those above including telling of problems and empathy as a more appropriate response than advice. They also suggested that there was a mismatch between what a poster asked for and what was offered. Again, second stories and hedging were used when offering advice and there was an interesting pattern where those asking for advice would often answer their own questions for people in other threads. They would also advise others like medical professionals would.

Finally, work has been done into thread endings. Morrow’s (2006) demonstrated most threads, but not all ended with advice being accepted, and thanks provided. ‘Thanks’ was used to acknowledge a poster had received help, even if this help was constructed as no use. If ‘thanks’ was placed at the end of a post, it ended the thread. Thanks messages often contained expression of thanks and then an elaboration on why the thanks meant a lot. Some of the thanks messages rejected the advice offered. Nobody said they would take the advice, although sometimes it was evaluated in a positive way. Morrow (2006) explains these findings by highlighting the power relationship between the giver and the receiver. The relationship of power is something that both recipients want to avoid so they are polite.

As will be seen in the analysis of the data in this thesis, many of these aspects are typical to my support forum, although my research is about student life and not as apparently serious as depression/suicide/self-harm etc. The research suggests support forums offer a positive space where new and enduring identities can be worked through and managed, and, in contrast to the negative impression often encountered from the media, these forums are helpful to some people. These forums seem to offer solace to the recipients and initial posters. Mishara and Kerkhoff, (2013, cited in Wiggins et al., 2016, p.3) call these ‘online rescue operations.’ Such rescue operations are also apparent in my data.

Seymour-Smith’s (2013) study takes this one step further and concludes that such forums should be offered to those facing the possibility of testicular implants as it can help them come to terms with their decision and renegotiate what it means to be a man with testicles that differ from the norm and rework this as a new normal. By extension, it is possible that other forums could also be offered as a source of support. Similarly, Cranwell and Seymour-Smith (2012) suggest that their findings could be used to help explain to people what will happen post-bariatric surgery. Furthermore, the results of Mudry and Strong’s (2013) gambling study suggest discourses may or may not be in line with what professionals are hearing from clients. They suggest identity transformation work may be useful in
therapy as that tends to happen in this forum. A further point by Smithson et al., (2011) suggests there is a difference between telephone helplines and support forums in terms of advice offered and points out the different communication may be being used for different purposes. Similarly, Paulus and Varga (2015) came to the conclusion that grief experiences may be constructed differently off and online and that by understanding grief support forums counsellors may be able to recommend them. Some advice offered for forums as a whole include recommending forums need to be clearer in their ‘joining’ rules and message. For example, it should be more obvious if a diagnosis is not required to join, and that there are separate threads for those who have not been diagnosed (Stomme and Meijman, 2010).

On a slightly different note, the construction of professional identities in online support forums has revealed professional identities also need to be carefully managed. Perrotta, (2006) investigated Italian psychologists on an asynchronous support forum. They used a framework of social constructionism and Bourdieu’s critical theory, drawing on the macro end of discursive psychology. The researchers looked at how participants constructed the identity of psychologist by managing the dilemma of ‘real’ versus ‘fake’ psychologist. They looked at 239 posts from 2004-2005. Perrotta (2006) identified three interpretative repertoires. These were professional boundaries, disempowered psychology, and psychology and health. In the professional boundaries repertoire, participants discussed how to keep people who were not ‘real’ psychologists out of the profession by using metaphors of battle and war. The disempowered psychology repertoire involved complaints, examining how psychology was not seen as a discipline as renowned as other professions (like doctors or teachers). One way this was done was via a comparison with the United States. The final repertoire was psychology and health, which revealed there was a dilemma to be managed: whether or not psychology is a health-related profession. Some claimed that doctors think they are psychologists too and that the psychologist is superior to the doctor. Others claimed psychology is not a health-related profession and there was a further dilemma over whether or not ‘curing’ people with psychology is possible. This research is useful because it was not only interested in discourse production but also the social and cultural context of that production, so it meant that the role of cultural context can be understood, both ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ the forum.

Finally, a Facebook study of 20 Malaysian English teachers (Ab Rashid et al., 2016), used linguistic ethnography and looked at how teachers constructed social support on a forum. Negative posts were common - including problems with other teachers, students and time pressure. This paper argues that such disclosure leads to a co-constructing of support – both in terms of information helping and
emotional support. It is argued these postings help teachers cope with work-related stress and that teachers construct their identities via this collaboration and support work. The identities that emerged were the dissenter and the slogger. One example of the slogger was one who presented themselves as doing many different roles as a teacher. The author argues this demonstrates that the readers do not have shared knowledge of what it means to be a teacher, and instead are more interested in promoting the self.

Bringing this all together, support forum research has highlighted several poignant and important points. Joining a support forum appears to be more than just pressing a button. As the above shows, constructing oneself as genuinely owning the identity of suicidal, depressed and grieving (among others) means acceptance into the forum. This management of identity is delicate, however, as when offering support, a member of the forum needs to ‘step back’ from their own story to offer advice, so identities are fluid and flexible. In other words, different identities are drawn on at different times for different purposes. Second stories and idioms, as a means of offering advice, are very common. Advice, although offered, is not always accepted. Closing sequences often involve an expression of thanks and the construction of different responses to situations being acceptable. Some advice offered for forums as a whole include recommending forums need to be clearer in their ‘joining’ rules and message. For example, it should be more obvious if a diagnosis is not required to join, and there should be separate threads for those who have not been diagnosed (Stommel and Meijman, 2010).

None of these studies are on students and their online construction of student identities, which is what my research is focused on. Although there are a few studies related to professionalism and teaching, as above, my focus is on students on Facebook. Facebook demonstrates a different type of communication than message board forums and it is argued in this thesis that it is simpler to join a Facebook forum for educational support, than the forums above.

2.7 Accountability, emotion and CA/DP

Discursive psychology is concerned with how people make themselves accountable for actions in discourse and how they hold others accountable for their actions. When writing in forums, people are responsible for making their accounts hold ‘truth’ in that they need to account for possible challenges to those truths (Edwards and Potter, 1995) and do stake inoculation. Stake inoculation is when speakers make available a defence to being accused of having a stake in their claim (Wiggins,
2017). For example, in Sneijder and te Molder’s (2009) paper on veganism, speakers attend to their vegan breakfasts as ordinary and easy, which avoids accusation of veganism needing substantial preparation and cooking. It can be seen from the previous section that people need to make themselves accountable to justify being in the forums, and to ask for and offer advice. They do this by building forum-appropriate identities. As we have seen, second stories are a popular way to account for offering advice. In doing these actions, people can justify or excuse their own ‘tellings’.

Interest in accountability is a large area in discursive psychology (Hepburn and Wiggins, 2005). Wiggins (2014) argues that identity and accountability are interrelated in that people need to orient to and account for those identities in interaction. In Wiggins’ (2004) paper on weight management, she explains how people orient to a ‘weight’ identity as something that is internal and stable. People accounted for their stable identity in different ways: those who identified as overweight used strategies such as blaming medication or claiming that they had always been that way. They were accountable for the context they were in (a weight management group meeting). This research suggests that discourse is used to orient to a fixed identity. If students orient to a fixed identity of ‘failing’ or ‘struggling’ this could have huge implications for their degree, which is another reason my research is important. Accountability was also used by participants discussing family eating practices (Wiggins, 2014). People would claim others had food preferences so they could hold them accountable for what they were eating or drinking.

Similarly, Horton-Salway’s (2001) study into ME talk, demonstrates how the identity of an ME sufferer is made accountable by contrasting against the construction of an ME sufferer as a malingerer. The participants in the interviews used ‘scientific’ accounting for where ME was caught, for example by blaming swimming in a pool which is a hotbed of germs. This narrative and accounting for being sedentary is made convincing as the participants explain that polio used to be caught in swimming pools. Furthermore, elaborate detail is used to intensify the construction of suffering in a person with ME. Corroboration (via active voicing) is also used. Finally, by contrasting life as it used to be before the ME diagnosis, the person is constructed as genuinely ill and not a malingerer.

Some work has been done on accountability and students. Hendry et al., (2016) investigated how students would make themselves accountable for using their mobile phones in class. They showed that mobile phone use was constructed as important. Some said they were using their phone to help
them with their work. Another example was where others oriented to the non-accountability of the student using the phone (the student was using it covertly under the table).

Research into students using Moodle to interact with their peers (Lester and Paulus, 2011) demonstrated that students made themselves accountable in various ways. They either minimised their stake in terms of the task at hand and/or worked to convince others they knew what they were talking about. They either resisted academic identity and used ‘I don't know’, which according to Edwards and Potter (2005), minimises stake, or used overly academic discourse and script formulations. When students accounted for their knowledge, they did so by claiming that doctors or others in the know had told them and they were reporting the information. Therefore, if the information was incorrect, it was not their fault. Other strategies for accounting included consensus formulations, such as ‘everyone knows’ and ECFs. Lester and Paulus (2011) point out that previous research into CMC and education has been criticised because threads were not seen to be detailed enough to offer good data for analysis. However, this fails to take into account how complex the threads can be. Even short threads can offer a wealth of discursive interaction.

On a slightly different note, Flinkfeldt (2011) investigated a Swedish forum of 3,331 posts, using discursive psychology, to examine how the delicate balance of being on sick leave and being allowed to take part in activities was managed. The research showed how being on sick leave is an accountable matter. Once again, posters worked hard to build up an identity of ‘genuinely entitled to sick leave’. This suggests that once again convincing others that one is in the right place (a support forum) at the right time (right now) is important in order for identity to be convincing and affiliation to be done. In this forum a balance needed to be struck between being ill enough to stay at home but well enough to do other things, as posters did not want to be accused of being lazy and avoiding work. Flinkfeldt argues this is a moral matter. When on sick leave, people constructed everyday activities, that healthy people would find simple, as problematic. For example, going on a walk is constructed as a necessity, rather than enjoyable. As doing activity could mean accusing someone of being well enough to work, people classify these as better days to account for their activity. The free time that not being at work accords is constructed as undesirable. Free time was complained about to avoid being accused of being a malingerer. Overall, to manage identity of being legitimately on sick leave but well enough to do other things, people blame their illness for things they cannot do and claim that having fun makes them feel better, so it is alright to do fun things. They also minimise the extent of undertaken activities, use ECFs and the irony emoticon to further bolster their case.
In relation to work, Hepburn and Brown (2001) used interviews with teachers in Scottish secondary schools to investigate how the emotion category of ‘stress’ was deployed to account for teachers’ experiences and do stake inoculation (which is when discourse pre-empts accusations of bias and/or others’ motivations). Their interviews demonstrated how ‘stress’ is invoked as a category for teachers to make sense of their roles and relationships to do with their work. The teachers used stress to establish ‘truths’ in their accounts and make themselves accountable for doing their job properly. All teachers were constructed as stressed, which meant difficulties with the job became less about the internal person, and more about the external structures, such as the profession as a whole. Stress was also used as a reason for inappropriate behaviour, along with the idiom of ‘the best will in the world’ (Hepburn and Brown, 2001, p.701). The teacher-pupil relationship was constructed as difficult and stressful because more serious sanctions (such as physical punishment) have been removed for behaviour and teachers who do employ sanctions need to deal with substantial paperwork and other people. The researchers argued that stress was a safer category to draw on than other mental health categories because of the implications such categories have for being able to do your job properly.

Emotion and accountability are closely linked. In discursive psychology emotion is not researched as a feeling but as a resource (Edwards, 1997). According to Edwards, emotion discourse helps when constructing oneself or others as accountable or, on the other hand people may have to make their emotion accountable. Edwards explains how people use scripted event sequences to justify their emotions, ‘falling into routine, recognisable patterns’ (Edwards, 1997, p.143). People have a ‘bank’ of recognisable ways of describing what happened, drawing on emotion discourse to justify emotion states. Edwards (1997) uses the example of Jimmy and Connie, a couple in counselling for their marital issues, to explain how Jimmy uses discourses of emotion to account for his violent actions both towards his wife and himself. Jimmy describes the story of an event where his wife was flirting with another man, in substantial detail to justify his actions of throwing her on the bed and wanting to throw himself out the window. Edwards (1997) shows how emotion terminology, such as anger and fear, can be used in discourse to account for particular actions.

Similarly, Lecouteur and Oxlad (2011) researched how men in counselling for domestic violence constructed the women they were violent towards and found that women were constructed as morally wrong in their behaviour, and this was the cause of extreme emotion and violence. This was seen in men who both accepted and denied that their violence was wrong. The women were made accountable and blamed for the actions of the men.
Emotion talk was also researched by Pudlinski (2005) who looked at trouble-telling on a peer-peer support line, examining sympathy and empathy offering. Eight methods were identified. It was found emotive reactions, assessments and formulating the gist of trouble happens at the start of a sequence and idiom was used at the end as a closing device and as a pre-closing device. The dimensions of empathy and sympathy can be seen in figure 4:

Figure 4: Pudlinski’s (2005) dimensions of sympathy and empathy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Depth of understanding of troubling news</th>
<th>Depth of understanding of feelings</th>
<th>Normalizes or downplays feelings</th>
<th>Shared similarity of feelings (beyond basic concern)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotive reactions</td>
<td>Minimal sense of how bad the news is</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessments</td>
<td>Moderate sense of how bad the news is</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naming another’s feelings</td>
<td>Strong sense of how bad the news is</td>
<td>Strong sense of how the caller feels</td>
<td>Possibly, as callers subsequently detail their own feelings</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formulating the gist of the trouble</td>
<td>Strong sense of trouble and its significance</td>
<td>Moderate sense of understanding</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using an idiom</td>
<td>Strong sense of trouble’s significance</td>
<td>Moderate sense of understanding</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing one’s feelings about another’s trouble</td>
<td>General sense of understanding the trouble</td>
<td>General sense of understanding</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Feelings shared are not necessarily similar ones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporting one’s own reaction</td>
<td>Moderate sense of how bad the news is</td>
<td>Strong yet moderately accurate sense of how the caller feels</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, conveys how one would feel if they were in a similar situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing a similar experience of similar feelings</td>
<td>Strong sense of understanding the trouble</td>
<td>Strong sense of understanding how the caller feels</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, if performed well, shares similarity of troubles and feelings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Emotion is an important aspect of my research. Studying is an emotional investment and comes at a cost. In the case of mature students, this can be at the cost of family time and career. It will become
apparent in the analysis that some of the techniques in the above table are also drawn on when offering sympathy and empathy.

2.8 Complaints

One of my analysis chapters focuses on complaints, so I now turn to outline research from a CA/DP approach into this area. This is closely related to accountability (see above). When a complaint is made in a forum, a poster has to account for why they are complaining and justify their complaint. According to Edwards (2005) complaints are not always obvious and therefore, working them up interactionally is essential. Drew and Walker (2009, p.2405) explain that there is a pattern to complaints: they begin ‘cautiously’ and are then ‘collaboratively co-constructed’ and eventually reach ‘escalation’ after collaboration is established. Sometimes, if the complaint is not taken seriously enough, a complainer may be accused of whining (Edwards, 2005), rather than a justifiable complainer, similar to Flinkfeldt’s (2011) research into sick leave. Making a complaint, therefore, is a difficult and delicate matter, which needs careful discursive management. Edwards (2005) draws on Potter and Hepburn’s (2003) research into telephone complaints on neighbours, where neighbours used the word ‘concern’ to explain they were complaining about neighbours’ noise in order to be taken seriously. Edwards summarises two types of complaints: direct (where complaints are made towards the recipient) and indirect (where complaints are made about a specific issue or person, usually in the past). My research is concerned with indirect complaints because the complaints are being made about people or things that the students in this data set are unhappy with but are not directly given to the object of complaint.

Drew’s (1998) work showed very thoroughly how telephone complaints are worked up and organised in particular ways. Complaints were positioned as moral concerns, where someone must be constructed as having done something wrong and justifiably so, to the hearer of the conversation. He showed how in mundane telephone conversations, complaints are ‘bounded sequences’ (Drew, 1998, p.304) in that they have a clear beginning and end. He explains that complaints begin with a specific topic ‘turn’ or change/ introduction to the trouble or announcement. An example he gives is when one of the participants says, ‘I’m broiling about something’ (Drew, 1998, p.305), explaining that a complaint is about to start. The complaint is then ‘defensively detailed’ (Drew, 1998, p.297) or explained in great detail before there being a ‘squelch’ (Drew, 1998, p.308) or an end exclamation which curtails and summarises the complaint. Drew also explains that a complaint is often about behaviour that is against what is normally expected. Dersley
and Wooton (2000), however, point out that this is not always the case and sometimes there is no clearly bounded example of what makes a complaint.

Pomerantz (1986) looked at the use of complaints and ECFs. She offers the example of a wife complaining about her husband being with another woman for all of Mothers’ Day, which Pomerantz terms a maximum case formulation. This formulation is used to bulk up the wife’s complaint about her husband who she constructs as not only a cheater, but one who has done it on a day that husbands ‘should’ be with their wives and children. By using ECFs, the complainant makes the complaint seem more serious and therefore, justified. According to Pomerantz (1986) the complainants do this because they cannot assume that those hearing (or reading) the complaint will react in the way they desire (i.e., the speaker or reader may be constructing their discourse for an unsympathetic audience).

Drew and Holt’s (1988) work into idioms is aligned with Pomerantz’s (1986) work into ECFs, explaining that idioms, as well as ECFs work to strengthen complaints. However, ECFs and idioms also differ in that ECFs are used when detailing the complaint and idioms are used to summarise. They also explain that idioms are not meant to be taken literally, unlike ECFs (which although they may not be literally correct are expressed as such). Idioms are also used to convince the receiver the complaint is real. For example, one patient explains to his doctor that his headaches are ‘more than the devil in hell’ (Drew and Holt, 1988, p.401) which undermines the possible accusation that his headaches are not problematic. Idioms are used then, to convince others that a complaint is genuine and prevent accusations of lying.

In terms of identity, Stokoe and Hepburn (2005) in a discursive psychological analysis, showed how participants worked up an identity of ‘reasonable complainer’ when complaining to telephone helplines. They showed how, during a neighbourhood mediation session, one neighbour constructs her children as being ordinary children, who were playing (therefore bound to make a lot of noise) in response to accusations of there being a lot of noise from her house. The neighbour constructs themselves as not at fault for the complaint. Explanatory detailing takes place in a further example, where a person calling the NSPCC helpline explains the situation in a lot of detail before she explains what the actual problem is. Contrast is also used in the discourse when complaints are built up. For example, occasional noise from neighbours is contrasted with noise occurring frequently. Reasonable neighbours look after their children; noisy neighbours leave their children alone and are irresponsible. Using contrast was also found in Weatherall and Stubbe’s (2015) research into the use
of emotion discourse in complaints to telephone helplines on utilities, where an MS sufferer contrasted his professional behaviour with the unprofessionalism of an energy company. The researchers concluded that the formulation of emotion is used to justify complaints. They also noted that alignment of the trouble occurs at the end of trouble-telling calls. To summarise, these findings suggest sometimes complainers work to position themselves as reasonable and may use emotion discourse to back this up. They do this in opposition to unreasonable others.

Looking at the identity of stepmothers in interviews and forums, Roper (2017) argues that complaining in a forum could be the result of anonymity and that people come to forums expecting support and understanding. Roper (2017) also argues that negativity is enhanced in forums because of complaining, which means people become disempowered. This research was based on how stepmothers negotiated their identity in response to shared understandings of what a stepmother is. Roper (2017) found stepmothers complained about men being useless but helpless in relationships, as not very good with their children’s emotional development and as unable to live up to a masculine ideal. It was also the case that lesbian partners did not construct their lesbian partners like this but did the fathers of their own and their partner’s children. Roper argues this is evidence for the available gendered constructions in society. The biological mother was also complained about as ‘mad, bad and sometimes dangerous’ (Roper, 2017, p.5).

From the above, it can be concluded that research has been done via CA and DP on complaints and how these are built and negotiated in spoken discourse. There have been limited studies into written complaints. In 2014, Al-Momani claimed that there were no studies into written complaints although my research uncovered Vasquez’s (2013) Foucauldian analysis into complaints and identity on TripAdvisor. Vasquez's research found that, like other research into identity work on a forum, people have to ‘work hard’ discursively to build up genuine, convincing identities that show they know what they are talking about, if they are to be accepted, especially when complaining. People claimed they were reasonable and would not normally be ones to complain. Humour was sometimes used. Al-Momani (2014) used critical discourse analysis to look into direct university student complaint letters in Jordan about their professors. The research showed a pattern of ‘backgrounding’ (or detailing the complaint), much like is done in spoken discourse, explaining the situation and then asking for a complaint to be resolved or withdrawn.

Since then McCreddie et al., (2018) have analysed written healthcare complaints, using discourse analysis and found that complaints that were more serious and complex were built up to undermine
alternatives, moving from the ‘objective facts’ to ‘subjective experience’. Patients went to great effort to justify their complaints, using reported speech and ‘evidence’ from people who knew that they were justified in their complaint. This is similar to Flinkfeldt’s (2011) research (see above). Patients (Mccreadie et al., 2018) would outline what had happened in terms of time and claimed their version of events was factual. Like in spoken discourse and Vasquez’s (2013) TripAdvisor research, some complainants worked towards being a ‘reasonable complainer’ by explaining that they understood the NHS was a publicly funded body but they were still justified to complain. They claimed they did not want to complain but had no other choice. Again, like Pomerantz’s (1986) study, ECFs were used to justify and defend complaints so that the complaint could be taken seriously. Furthermore, as in Stokoe and Hepburn’s (2005) paper, contrast was used: there was a difference between the reasonable complainant and the unreasonable object of the complaint. Most people wanted an explanation and apology or investigation, that is they wanted understanding rather than money. Mccreadie et al., (2018) conclude that there may be a relationship between what people complain about and how it can be resolved discursively.

Earlier on, this research review outlined CA/DP work into laughter. Laughter has also been researched in relation to complaint sequences by Holt (2012), using CA. Holt uncovers a typical pattern of laughter use during complaint interaction, as follows: ‘1. a complaint; 2. a non-affiliative or less than fully affiliative response; 3. pursuit and upgrade of the complaint; and 4. a laugh response’ (Holt, 2012, p.435). Holt argues in complaint sequences, laughter is not always a sign of affiliation or even disaffiliation but falls somewhere in the middle. In these sequences, the laughter works to discourage further complaining but maintains ‘social solidarity’ (Holt, 2012, p.430). Holt (2012) points out that people generally work to maintain solidarity and align/affiliate in conversation. When complaining, people tend to work towards approval of the other involved (if complaining about a third party) so outright disagreement is difficult.

Now that the literature review has examined accountability and complaints, it will shift focus back to education research and demonstrate related research to my topic of concern: the informal environment of the student Facebook forum.

2.9 Facebook research

The literature review will now consider why Facebook is an important platform to analyse. Barton and Lee (2013) argue that there has been a huge shift to online learning and much of this is informal
through sites like Facebook and Flickr. They also argue that this shift is a ‘major challenge for all fields of learning’ (Barnton and Lee, 2013, p.136). Because collaborative learning and networking could help to encourage critical thinking (Selwyn, 2009) and offer ‘the capacity to radically change the educational system...to better motivate students as engaged learners rather than learners who are primarily passive observers of the educational process’ (Ziegler, 2007, cited in Selwyn, 2009, p. 158), we cannot ignore how students use Facebook forums in relation to academia. This section will therefore investigate the popularity of Facebook and why students use it.

### 2.9.1 The popularity of Facebook

Survey research suggested over 90% of students had Facebook accounts in the USA in 2007 (Ellison et al., 2007). Social media and specifically Facebook are therefore hugely popular virtual spaces used by students and much is going on in these spaces which has not been uncovered by research.

### 2.9.2 Why do students use Facebook?

There has been research into the type of students who use Facebook. Skues et al., (2012) focused on the relationship between personality traits, self-esteem, loneliness, narcissism and student use of Facebook using questionnaires and statistics. The research suggested more students who have ‘open’ personalities use Facebook to make connections with their friends, but somewhat in contradiction, more reserved people may use it to make up for their less satisfactory real-world relationships. Skues et al., (2012) also found students use Facebook to avoid academic tasks. This suggests different types of people use Facebook for different purposes.

Students do use their own Facebook newsfeeds to communicate with other students. A case study approach by Amicucci (2017) investigated one student’s use of Facebook on their own newsfeed. The participant explained what they were doing retrospectively, when using Facebook, to the researcher. Amicucci (2017) argued there is a particular discourse people learn when using Facebook in order to achieve responses. In this case, the participant managed an identity of a non-mainstream person who did not overly reveal. The participant also posted particular items at particular times to entice particular people to reply. Being overly personal in Facebook, according to this study, is not deemed acceptable. From Amicucci’s (2017) findings, it would seem that for successful interaction, keeping the personal out of identity work is important as well as learning ‘how to discursively be accepted’ on Facebook.
It is also important for students to be on Facebook for social purposes (Cheung et al., 2011), so they know what is going on in case there are events they might wish to attend. This was discovered via a questionnaire study. Pempek et al., (2009), via a diary study and survey, concluded Facebook is used mainly by students to communicate, upload or view photos and procrastinate (also see Skues et al., 2012). They also noted that students used Facebook to create certain types of identity, through posting what they were interested in online.

There do seem to be some negatives associated with student use of Facebook. Poor academic results have been associated with those who use Facebook frequently (Hewitt, 2004). Michikyan et al., (2015) thematically analysed student Facebook posts and concluded that students who did worse on assignments posted more negative Facebook statuses. Michikyan et al., (2015) believe that academic grades may be predictive of how students use Facebook and that this could be important knowledge for student support services in universities. My research builds on this by showing how students position themselves in relation to problems with academic work.

However, positives are also reported, such as that Facebook may be used to gain peer support (Blight et al., 2015). Using a survey method, where students analysed the meaning of their own posts, revealed that it was not ‘likes’ that necessarily suggested support was being offered. Support was more likely to come from those students knew well (offline). In asking for support, students used many different types of comments. These were classified by Blight et al., (2015) as indirectly positive comments (offering information on something positive that has happened), indirectly negative comments (offering information on something negative that has happened), indirect mixed (both positive and negative), direct requests for support, vague comments (those aimed at one person but posted in public), or quotations. My research builds on this, showing how such requests are discursively managed from participants that may not have met in real life.

Research suggests some students use Facebook to create an identity of a typical binge-drinking student. Tonks et al. (2015) used Foucauldian discourse analysis on retrospective interviews of students looking at their pages to investigate student drinking identities. The research revealed how students co-construct and reconstruct the memories of drinking adventures. A discourse and identity of the risky drinker, dangerous teenage drinker and one who was out of control was rejected and
instead, students constructed themselves as a bit drunk, but not enough to be totally embarrassing. Tonks et al., (2015) argue this is a re-creation of identity.

The research outlined in this section has been done on traditional university students. In my research, students are distance-learning students and online communication may be their only way to communicate with each other, suggesting that the reasons for Facebook use may not be the same. It is important to note that of course, my research is not looking for this, but at discourse patterns in the forum, which may differ and may be more closely related to support forums, than traditional university students.

2.10 Formal and informal online learning spaces

My research examines an informal education related space on Facebook. Students use social media for different purposes. Students may use such groups formally, as part of their course, set up by lecturers. These may be VLE (virtual learning environments) or more social environments, such as Facebook. Social media may be used personally, by an individual who posts for all their linked friends (including their student audience), or it may be used as part of a special group set up for the purposes of discussing issues around academic life. Such a group may be set up because there are no other online group options, or it may be because students want to discuss their university lives in less formal environments. My chosen forum was one that had been set up by students, for students in order to informally offer support and discuss their module. This section will outline some of the research that has been done on formal and informal learning spaces.

2.10.1 Formal learning spaces

Formal online learning was investigated by Hughes (2010), who examined collaborative learning on blended learning courses among IT and sports science students. Thematic analysis of interviews revealed that identity difference among students could lead to resentment in online forums if they had an academic task to do. Sub-groups formed, and ‘lurkers’ or those who simply did not log on, were ostracised. Not contributing until the last minute caused great anxiety in more communicative students. The study also showed that social membership of an online group might actually restrict learning. Discourses could also be excluding, if they were overly academic. The researcher used interview data, which relies on memory. I rejected interviewing for my research as I wanted to examine how identities are built up discursively in real time, rather than relying on memory.
A popular method for investigating formal online learning spaces is content analysis. Farr and Riordan (2015) examined student teachers and their identity construction online, through synchronous and asynchronous communication using blogs, forums and the chat function. Quantitative tools examined how often certain words were used such as ‘good teacher’ (Farr and Riordan, 2015, p.117) and the types of things they said, such as ‘I think’ (Farr and Riordan, 2015, p.116). They argued blogs tended to be for reflective narrative and chat and forums for creating relationships and discussion. The authors argue student teachers have to manage a difficult identity between good student teacher and learning student teacher. Waiyahong (2014) also used content analysis and quantitative methods in a study where students used Facebook to communicate with their lecturers and read wall posts, ask questions and post links. Waiyahong showed not all lecturers took part and online safety and privacy was also a concern, as well as a lack of connectivity. My research builds on this by examining Facebook discourse as constructed in an informal environment.

Adin (2011) examined rapport building in classroom based asynchronous communication, by comparing face-to-face and online student group work. The research used discourse analysis and corpus-based analysis. The results suggested that face-to-face and online groups build rapport in different ways. Students remained more on task in the online interactions. Rapport techniques (discourse functions) in the online groups included greetings, closings, mentioning something that had already happened in the group, apologising, mitigating criticism, agreeing, aligning, commiserating, complimenting, seeking agreement, offering encouragement, thanking and responding to thanks. My research builds on this by looking at how students interact in a social, rather than academic environment.

A mixed-method approach (heuristic evaluation of forums and thematic analysis of reflective essays and exam questions by de Villiers and Pretorius, 2013) on a Facebook forum, uncovered that students enjoyed academic purposes of a forum, as well as the social aspects (although there were some who did not engage). The research was based on postgraduate student collaboration on a Facebook forum set up by course leaders, who facilitated the forum. Lecturers were seen as useful in facilitating a good, working environment online.

A further example comes from Chau and Lee (2017), who examined a group on Facebook which was set up for a linguistics course, by staff, to look at identity construction, drawing on discourse centred ethnography. The participants were Cantonese-English bilingual students. Students were interviewed
and forum posts were shown to them. The researchers argued that Facebook was being used for both academic and social constructions. Students in this research were looking for help with assignments, clarification of materials and offering information. They used emoji to save face. In one of the interviews, which was used as a case-study, the participant was aware he was using different identities for different purposes when interacting in the forum. From this, the authors argue that identities are fluid, even for one participant.

From their research, Chau and Lee (2017, p.35) modified the table below, originally from Schallert et al., (2009) to show how discourse worked in the group. They also advocate further research from a discursive perspective. My research builds on these findings, looking at a different type of student — distance-learners — and an informal, rather than formal environment.

Figure 5: Table of discursive constructions in a formal learning online environment

| 1. Seeking information |
| 2. Providing information |
| 3. Generating discussions |
| 4. Discussing ideas |
| 5. Making evaluations |
| 6. Expressing gratitude, greetings or support |
| 7. Showing instances of extended learning |
| 8. Directing others’ attention to the postings |
| 9. Making amendments or remarks |
| 10. Calling for support |
| 11. Maintaining connections |

**Fig. 1.** Discourse functions of the group (modified from Schallert et al., 2009).

Finally, Davis and Lester’s (2016) research into students in a USA online classroom, investigated, from a discursive approach, how graduate students construct identities when asked to situate
themselves in a research paradigm. They were interested in how these students used hedging and evidenced that students resist displaying knowledge, by minimising knowledge and justifying paradigmatic orientations. For example, one student oriented to the identity of student (she had done the reading) but did not understand it as it was not part of her ‘vernacular’ (Davis and Lester, 2016, p.61). Using ‘vernacular’ helped her justify it so she could avoid alternative explanations (i.e., she is incompetent). The students, who were often professionals, drew on their professional identities to engage with the task. They used different identities to align with categorisation – a biology student made a claim to the postpositive paradigm, explaining that she was a scientist and preferred objectivity, whereas a teacher said they were more aligned with being a critical researcher. On the whole, it was found that people drew on category analysis in order to back up their positions.

However, some students found this task difficult and could not orient to one paradigm. Students would use their own experience to justify their positions, to avoid being contradicted. The researchers concluded that talking about a research identity is a delicate matter. There is a disconnect between doing being a graduate student who still has to learn and aligning to a researcher category. ‘Identity work, particularly when linked to displaying what you know, can be inherently risky for some students, and brings with it the potential for losing face in front of peers’ (Paulus and Lester, 2013, cited in Davis and Lester 2016, p.60). The researchers conclude that the way research methods are taught (here is a map, pick your place) is not necessarily the most useful as it may suggest some are better and/or more recent than others. They advocate situating research paradigms as more fluid and that it is important to examine these in the context of students’ everyday life.

2.10.2 Informal learning spaces

There is a difference between learning formally and informally online. My research is concerned with an informal forum. Examining Flickr, Barton and Lee (2013) claim there are four ways people informally learn online. One way is by participating in site-related practices. Another is by communicating with others about activities (such as Flickr photos) which leads to ‘scaffolding’ (Barton and Lee, 2013, p.131). Furthermore, people can learn online by advising and gaining feedback from others and, finally, through reflexivity (like blogging, which leads to a recognition of one’s achievements and progress). Barton and Lee (2013) see such informal learning as positive and worthwhile.
Evidence does suggest students prefer Facebook over Moodle. Deng and Tavares (2013) interviewed 14 student teachers in their final year (because they could not get access to the closed student Facebook group) and utilized activity theory. Findings showed that Moodle participation was low despite instructor encouragement. Students claimed they preferred Facebook because it was easier to access and discussion was more honest. Students saw Moodle more as a formal learning space but claimed they learned more from Facebook. On Moodle the groups were intentionally separated into teaching groups, but in Facebook, everyone was equal. They spoke about ideas for teaching and problems, which would not be discussed on Moodle. They also claimed fear of embarrassment stopped them using Moodle as lecturers were reading their posts.

Some research has suggested that students think lecturers should leave them alone on Facebook and not attempt to get involved (Gettman and Cortijo, 2015). Gettman and Cortijo (2015) used a questionnaire and focus group to explore various ways students and their lecturers interact on Facebook. Students saw Facebook as a social, rather than an educational tool and were not comfortable with Facebook being used for specific academic purposes. Gettman and Cortijo (2015) suggest that perhaps students need some training to accept and cope with the academic and social mix on Facebook. There has been a successful intervention like this, where students were educated on using Facebook for educational purposes, including privacy settings (Hurt et al., 2012). Hurt et al. (2012) used pre and post surveys of these students and found initially, students were resistant to using them, but were more positive about it towards the end.

The forum I researched is an academically related forum. Education is not its only function as will be revealed in the analysis.

2.10.3 OU research into formal social learning online spaces

To recap, there are different types of forums for education-related purposes. At the OU, there are different types of Facebook groups, set up for different purposes. The group I have chosen was set up by students, for informal use, but there are others. Callaghan and Fribbance (2016) examined how the department of social sciences at the OU has used Facebook to build community between staff and students. This page is controlled by OU staff but is an open forum. The researchers conclude that although Facebook may be seen as limited in academic ways, it is useful for social learning and for
making links between staff and students more cohesive. The paper suggests that the faculty’s purpose of setting this up was successful to a certain extent. The authors do raise concerns if students were engaging with their page instead of working on their studies, or if the opposite might apply. Staff-student power relations were apparent, as staff were controlling the page, unlike my research where students are in control of students. Callaghan and Fribbance (2016) advocate in-depth case studies with students, so my research can be seen as partly responding to this.

Prior quantitative research into student-led Facebook groups at the OU (Coughlan and Perryman, 2015), examined ten Facebook groups and concluded that Facebook groups are open educational practices and that OU students find them useful for their studies. They found students’ discussions focused on module materials and emotional support. The authors suggest this emotional support may mean students are less likely to withdraw from their module. They recommend academics support Facebook use and find out more about how students are using it, as there is a tendency for academics to see Facebook as negative. Although negative discussions did appear in their research, these were not extensive. Groups varied extensively on the amount of academic discussion. My research builds on this knowledge and advances understanding of how student Facebook groups function at the OU.

We can see a substantial amount of research has been undertaken into the formal learning environment, with less into informal academic online spaces. Finding out how students chat without formal academic staff presence can be done more easily now than before. Before the internet, getting access to informal discourse was difficult due to the contexts where chatting took place, i.e., in cafes/ pubs/ the home environment. If research was done, natural unfolding of conversation could have been affected if the researcher, or recording tools, were present. Transcribing data could be problematic because of noise. There are inevitable differences between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ way of communicating, as well as overlaps, which are all worth investigating in their own right. Hughes (2010, p.48) explains that ‘those working in further and higher education increasingly recognise that learning occurs in social contexts and is not an independent cognitive process’. This provides further support for my research as it is looking at the informal, online environment from an interactive perspective.
2.11 Student identities, on and offline

The penultimate section of the literature review looks at how students have been shown to construct identities in recent CA/DP research. Research is again based on brick university students.

Rejecting academic identity seems to be a key theme in the research on what it means to be a student. Benwell and Stokoe’s (2002) study of student interaction in the classroom found this. They recorded students from three universities, in a variety of different subject-specific tutorials. Two of the universities produced 8 hours of audio-data from tutor-led tutorials of class sizes of 3-10 students. The third university produced data from 30 different group discussions (not tutor-led), with one group being videoed. The majority of students were aged below 21, with a few mature students. The researchers analysed student discourse in terms of turn-taking, politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987) and identity work. Students resisted academic identities by being discursively disruptive or difficult. They used silence when responses to tasks were expected. A tutor cannot continue a discussion if nobody talks.

When a student did construct their self as a good student, discursive trouble arose. To manage ‘doing being a good student’ and one that could see the value of tasks in a tutorial, this student made use of minimising techniques, such as ‘just’; ‘like’ and ‘I mean’ to construct themselves as not brilliant, just normal — but able to see the usefulness of a tutorial task. Such constructions did not automatically gain a response from other students, leading the first student to normalise her position with ‘Well(.) I do anyway(.)’ (Benwell and Stokoe, 2002, p.442). Benwell and Stokoe (2002) argue that this position (of constructing oneself as understanding the usefulness of the task) is unusual in student tutorials, and instead, it is more usual to construct oneself as engaging with tasks because they have to.

Furthermore, Benwell and Stokoe (2002) show how students normalise their knowledge — so they will be vague instead of specific and claim less knowledge than they actually have. Benwell and Stokoe (2002) argue students use humour and normalisation because first and foremost they are a group who need to maintain their identities as ambivalent students.

The authors partly blame the current educational climate for students’ responses and constructions in tutorials, positioning students as consumers, rather than learners of knowledge. They point out
there are problems with the constructivist model of education; that students want the tutor to do
the work and that society and culture construct this as acceptable student behaviour.

The discursive construction of not being a ‘knowledgeable’ student was also uncovered by
Attenborough (2011), who investigated the margins of student textbooks. Attenborough (2011)
wanted to examine how the tension between doing being an academic student (and looking for a
good degree classification) and doing being an average student who is no different from their peers,
is managed in a medium other than university tutorials. Attenborough’s (2011) findings revealed that
students seemed to be doing education in textbook marginalia, rather than doing ‘being a student’.
Attenborough (2011) found that in contrast to using systematic vagueness to construct student
identity as ‘normal’, as Benwell and Stokoe (2002) did, in marginalia, students were very specific in
their comments. In tutorials, students would refer to being lucky if they got something right or refer
to specific academics as ‘thatoldwhatsit’ (Benwell and Stokoe, 2002, p.445), but in marginalia,
students were more specific, and used an appropriate academic register, often similar to that heard
in lectures. Interestingly, Attenborough (2011) also argues that through marginalia there is evidence
of students tutoring themselves as a tutor is absent — which is a position OU students are in much of
the time. This ‘doing being an academic student’, he argues, is partly due to the anonymity of
academic textbooks, however, students are still doing this in a semi-public arena (as other students
will borrow the book). There was also evidence of students tagging other students’ work — which
Attenborough (2011) argues as evidence of normalising academic identity and policing the
appropriateness of overly academic comments.

Building on Attenborough’s (2011) research, Stokoe et al., (2013) researched student identity
through CA, not only in tutorials, the marginalia of textbooks, but also, in student living spaces and in
a corridor where they collected their assignments. They also looked at Facebook data, but recorded
the use of Facebook Messenger, as opposed to a Facebook group as in my research. In all the
situations, students consistently reported they had not put in their maximum effort into assignments
and ‘doing no work’ and being unprepared for tutorials was the norm. Once again, the research
showed students had a dilemma to manage between the academic student and the social face of
being a student. In tutorials, tutors still used academic discourse, but students resisted the
positioning of being academic.
In terms of accounting for grades and marks, first class marks and 2.2’s and thirds were accountable, where 2.1’s were not. If students had particularly good marks, they downplayed their achievement and if they had lower than a 2.1, peers engaged in support work.

On Facebook Messenger, again, a resistance of academic identity was found. Students used emoticons to ironically construct themselves as not really looking forward to their tutorials. Stokoe et al., (2013) explain their results are context and culturally specific but bring attention to how such positioning can be connected to how we resist being arrogant in public life.

Similar findings have been found in the formal online environment. Paulus and Lester (2013) examined how students performed being ordinary. The discourse was gathered from a task set up online where students were asked to discuss their learning after a lecture on nutrition and food supplements. Students constructed themselves as normal people who study as opposed to people who are experts. Some positioned themselves as surprised by what they had learned and others constructed an ambivalent self, and a further group claimed no learning at all. This research corresponds well to the findings of Stokoe et al., (2013) as both papers suggest it is not appropriate to boast about being a good student.

Selwyn (2009) also uncovered similar themes through an analysis of an informal Facebook page with 909 UK undergraduate students. The students discussed their classes and tutors (often quite harshly); used information to help each other out if they were stuck with an assignment/course details; backed each other up when students required support; and cultivated an identity of a struggling student. It was not appropriate on the forum to be constructed as a knowledgeable or bright student, but one who needed help. My research extends this by looking at how students do support and identity work discursively rather than just thematically.

My research builds on all this previous research into student identities in several ways: it explores student identity from a discursive perspective, like some of the above studies, but it looks at data in a semi-public forum, as opposed to private messaging or a more formal learning environment. Although some work on informal student Facebook pages has been done by Selwyn (2009), this was done thematically, rather than discursively. Also, I am focusing on distance-learning students, as opposed to brick-university ones. In further support of my study, Benwell and Stokoe (2002) argue that little is known about how students interact outwith the classroom and my research goes some way to addressing this.
2.12 Practical uses of discursive psychology/CA

Identifying how students use identities to support each other is interesting in itself, however as this is a professional doctorate, understanding how to apply these findings is paramount. Antaki (2011) identifies six kinds of application of CA and these are foundational, social-problem oriented, communicational, diagnostic, institutional and interventionist. Education is not problem-free, and the intention of this thesis was to identify discursive strategies that are used, and therefore can be used by students to support them in their use of social media. A further reason was to help staff develop their understanding of how students are creating discursively helpful and problematic encounters on Facebook.

Reviewing previous work in this area has shown promising results, particularly from Stokoe’s Conversation Analytic Role-Play Method (CARM) (Stokoe, 2014). This method is about training people on how to deal with problems in interaction. It uses real-time encounters as opposed to simulated encounters. Using simulations has been shown to produce inaccurate results, evidenced by Stokoe, when comparing real police interviews to ones using actors. Evidence also suggests people have found CARM workshops more engaging because of the natural data used.

CARM uses the metaphor of a racetrack. In a workshop, conversation is compared to a racetrack with an architecture (for example opening and closing a conversation in a particular way, like on a racetrack) and that on the way to completing the race there are hurdles and ditches. Different tracks lead to different outcomes. Different workplaces have different racetracks. A CARM workshop looks at how to prevent putting hurdles in the way of talk. In the workshop the method, which Stokoe argues can be used by any institution, demonstrates interaction by using real examples. People listen to an actual recording and then look at what does and does not work in interaction. Firstly, they hear the interaction, then, the recording is stopped and participants discuss in groups what might work. The response is then played and people see what actually happened and evaluate what they have heard. Stokoe (2014) suggests this works because using the ‘next turn proof procedure’ means effective communication can be evidenced.

The method grew from Stokoe and Hepburn’s (2005) work on neighbourhood disputes. The research managed to generate ways for mediators of the neighbourhood dispute helpline to engage people and recruit clients. Stokoe (2014) demonstrated when callers phone up with a dispute, offering a resolution to a one-sided problem does not work, yet that is what the neighbourhood resolution team
offered. Stokoe (2014) argues that in order to be effective in advice offering, you need to know your racetrack.

Although workshops have been held on CARM-Talk, it has also been applied to CARM-Text. This is a similar method to CARM-Talk but works with written interaction instead. There are several ways my research could be applied in this way, and this will be developed in the discussion section. This demonstrates the practical implications and usefulness of my thesis.

This research has been undertaken with this practical application at the forefront. Students can learn from my data in discovering, and being helped to think critically about, what discursive support looks like, how it works and what is troubled in Facebook forums. This could be done by face-to-face or in online workshops. Further workshops with staff could raise awareness of what strategies students are using on Facebook, which will mean they will be better placed to advise students should problems arise.

This can only be done by investigating the previously unresearched combination of student-led Facebook forums from a discursive psychology perspective. We can see from the above that there has been substantial research in the areas of support forums, accountability and complaints, online identities, formal and informal learning and student identities, but none addressing my proposed combination. There may be several reasons for this. Social media is a relatively new phenomenon and research takes time. The ethical issue of being a covert observer may create concern for researchers. There may also be concerns in taking a talk-oriented theory and applying it to online discourse.

But, we could argue that just because something is difficult is no reason not to do it. Waiyahong (2014) argues Facebook groups need further investigation because they can be problematic and solutions need to be developed. Furthermore, Ask and Abidin, (2018) remind us that student research without institutional presence is limited. Also, as Facebook is a dynamic and ever-changing site, it can be argued that all previous research (and mine) is situated in time and place and it will require constant updating. However, there are permanencies that can be extracted from my research. We can assume there will always be students and we can assume they will always chat without lecturer presence. It is possible many of the strategies uncovered in my research may remain many decades after I and my fellow researchers have ceased to be.
DP was chosen because identity and construction are the focus of the research and how this is done in support forums. What is being explicated, is how people construct their identities as students, from the ground up, and ask for and offer help, support and advice, and complain. I am interested in how students live out their online lives in practice and how this information can be used to support students and staff (see above discussion on CARM).

2.13 Research Questions

Taking all this into consideration, I wanted to find out ‘what learner identities do students construct in a Facebook forum and how do they do it?’

The research question was broken down into three sub-research questions. Questions 1 and 2 were about help, advice and support work. If students are using Facebook forums for help, advice and support, it suggests there must be problems, hence question three. Bringing all these questions together illuminates the core purpose of the research – what identities students build and draw on in Facebook and how they do it.

1. What identities do distance-learning students construct to ask for help, support and advice in a Facebook forum and how do they do this discursively?
2. What identities do distance-learning students construct to offer help, support and advice in a Facebook forum and how do they do this discursively?
3. How do distance-learners open, build and close complaints in an informal Facebook forum?
3 Method

The method was informed by my interest in how participants discursively perform being a student on Facebook. I therefore followed discursive procedures when undertaking the data collection and analysis. This section will describe the design, pilot study, participants, data set (materials), ethical issues and analytical procedures undertaken.

3.1 Design

The study used naturally occurring data from one student Facebook forum and subjected the posts to a discursive psychological analysis. The forum was active for nine months (xxxxx\textsuperscript{10}) and a selection of data was gathered (see below for procedure). Students, who were studying the same module, set the forum up themselves. There was no tutor-moderator, although tutors may have been present in the forum through choice.

3.2 Pilot

The pilot study took place by downloading two threads from a similar group and analysing the data from a discursive perspective. Results suggested that Facebook forums are places students go for corroboration and help with their studies, so they must construct and build up an identity of a student who is deserving of this help to gain it. The pilot study demonstrated positioning work of the ‘unsure’ and/or ‘struggling’ student occurred. Students also built an identity of ‘helpful’, through corroboration of student status and ‘informal’ teaching. The pilot also found students manage blame in complex ways. Before assignments were due, blame for academic issues was managed between the module materials and the student themselves. When awaiting grades, blame was more oriented towards the other (the tutor or OU systems), but not always. The final data coding was sent to an EdD colleague who was researching a similar topic, for corroboration of data. She read over the final coding and agreed it was ‘logical and consistent’.

The pilot also allowed me to practice using NVivo (which is special computer software for coding and analysing qualitative data) and familiarise myself with it. One of the difficulties was ‘scraping’ the data into the programme. However, this was resolved by the time of the actual project due to updated settings. The pilot also allowed me to revise practising discursive analysis on paper.

\textsuperscript{10} Redacted text: see appendix 5.
3.3 Participants

The participants were studying a level xxx\textsuperscript{11} undergraduate xxx\textsuperscript{12} module at the OU during xxx\textsuperscript{13}. There were xxx\textsuperscript{14} participants in the forum at the time of scraping the data. Specifics of participants (age/ gender etc) are not relevant to this type of discursive study, as DP concentrates on discourse as a topic of study in its own right — not the person behind it (Wiggins, 2017). Furthermore, participant details cannot be reliably identified from online data. It is probable participants were very diverse, as is typical of OU students.

3.4 Data Set

Student posts from the forum made up the data set. Data was downloaded after the module was completed for ethical reasons (see below) and to avoid researcher effect issues. There is no researcher effect on the natural interaction of students as they did not know this forum would be used for research purposes when they were writing on it.

The table below outlines the extent of the data, covering pages, threads and posts. As can be seen, there were 2656 posts overall, with most of them occurring in xxxx\textsuperscript{15} when the students’ final assessment was due. The data was large and captured by screenshot and no word count is given in the software used. However, typically threads ranged from 6 words from the shortest thread to 1590 words in the longest thread. 453 sources were imported into NVivo via NCapture.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month\textsuperscript{17}</th>
<th>Pages (a new page was started for each thread)</th>
<th>Threads</th>
<th>Posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>82</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{11} Redacted text: see appendix 5.
\textsuperscript{12} Redacted text: see appendix 5.
\textsuperscript{13} Redacted text: see appendix 5.
\textsuperscript{14} Redacted text: see appendix 5.
\textsuperscript{15} Redacted text: see appendix 5.
\textsuperscript{16} For further information on descriptive statistics into the data set, please see Appendix 5.
\textsuperscript{17} Dates redacted: see appendix 5.
The Facebook forum posts were the materials used for analysis.

NVivo was used for a general overview of the data. NVivo was chosen because I wanted an electronic way of managing and ordering my data. It is also useful when searching for keywords. Pen and paper were used for the discursive micro-analysis.

3.5 Ethics

Ethics were taken seriously and all procedures were followed, in terms of consent, anonymity, being an inactive observer, use of student data and data security, as is outlined below.

3.5.1 Consent

One of the most interesting areas of my EdD was the ethical issues I encountered doing my research. My previous research into online forums had led me to (naively) believe that using online data was not problematic as it was in the ‘public domain’. Also, in 2009 a similar study to mine was carried out by Selwyn, who argued that the semi-public nature of this type of data meant that signed informed consent was not necessary and nor would it be practical. Selwyn was also an inactive observer in the forums, so he did not disturb the natural unfolding of conversation and, therefore the data. He gained ethical approval from his institution.

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<td>19</td>
<td>187</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>72</td>
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<td>32</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>176</td>
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<td>45</td>
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<td>308</td>
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<td>39</td>
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<td>221</td>
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<td>64</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>406</td>
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<td>175</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>1049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, it should be considered that the ethics of internet research are continually evolving. Selwyn’s study was in 2009. Mine began in 2015, six years later. The continual fluidity of online data did cause some problems for my project. Although ethical approval was gained and the pilot ran smoothly, the time between my initial ethical considerations and data gathering of the main study left a gap of 18 months \(^{18}\). During this time, Facebook systems updated. In the pilot study, I could not tell who had seen my message for consent and who had not. By the time I posted my main study consent message \(^{19}\), I could see who had read the message and who had not. I could no longer assume that my message had been seen and read by all those in the forum. I felt this was a substantial ethical dilemma. I did not believe it would be justifiable to use the quotes from people who had not seen my message as part of my analysis. As using quotes is vital for discursive data, this left me with a problem.

I feel, as researchers, we should always question the intrusiveness of our research into participants’ private and personal lives. I asked myself how I would feel if someone used my forum posts in Facebook for research without my permission. Whereas most of it would not concern me, there are other areas that might (photos of my child, for example). I was concerned that some participants may see such research as overly intrusive, so I returned to the ethics board for advice.

After consultation with the ethics board, it was agreed, for use of quotation, I would have to contact the people who had not seen the forum message and ask them for consent. To further complicate matters, several members of the forum had left the group, and therefore they needed to be contacted too. On a slightly different note, it is also of ethical concern that just because someone has seen a message, does not mean they have read it. However, the ethics board and I felt we could not control for this, so it was deemed ethically appropriate to accept this passive consent.

A revised message for consent was written and sent to students whose quotes may be used (see appendix 2). Three students refused permission. The vast majority did not respond to the message at all. Comments from students were only used if they gave either passive consent (established by the message in the forum) or active consent (established by the Facebook exchange via personal messenger).

\(^{18}\) Date redacted: see appendix 5.
\(^{19}\) Date redacted: see appendix 5.
A further ethical issue around consent arose when I posted my consent message in my first choice of forum for the main study. This forum was an extremely active one with over 800 members and an exceptionally rich pool of data. On the 20 I posted my ethical consent message and within 12 hours I was blocked from the forum. I could assume then, that consent had not been given. This also contributed to my decision on gaining consent from those who had not seen my consent message, as outlined above.

I suspect I was blocked for any number of reasons but some of these may have been as follows:

- People may have felt cheated. I joined this particular forum in 21 and had been watching the interaction unfold from a distance. I was initially accepted into the forum, and if anyone clicked on my name they would have seen that I was an OU tutor, so it was not done incognito, but it is probable most people were unaware of my position.
- xxxxxxxx22
- The nature of the group was antagonistic at times. The group had also been problematic in terms of management.
- The nature of the posts was possibly more ‘revealing’ than posts I had seen in other forums.
- It may be harder to gain consent online rather than face-to-face because people cannot see you and trust may be harder to build.

Luckily, I had a back-up plan – a second forum. Even more fortunately when I posted my consent message on this forum, they did not block me. The data from this forum is the data used for the main study. I have since noticed that there is no official admin in this forum, but the message clearly stated if people did not want to take part, they could email me.

### 3.5.2 Anonymity

To help make the research more ethical, all names were made anonymous and all identifying details (places, references to tutors and module units) were removed from the data.

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20 Redacted text: see appendix 5.
21 Redacted text: see appendix 5.
22 Redacted text: see appendix 5.
3.5.3 Being an inactive observer

Other ethical considerations include the point that I, as a xxxx\textsuperscript{23} tutor was observing these students, but not interacting, for part of their module. It could be argued that this is unfair to the students. However, I did not comment in the forum or use any written material to cause intentional harm to any participant. Furthermore, the students were not my own.

I was also aware that as an AL I might encounter some uncomfortable material about the OU, or about colleagues or even myself. I did not find this to be overly problematic in the end, as there were no instances of staff members being mentioned by name, only by initial and I did not know who the students were referring to.

3.5.4 Use of my own students' data

Between the pilot and the main study another ethical challenge arose. I had not had any of my own students’ data to deal with in the pilot, but I realised that data from some of my students did exist in my ‘first choice’ forum for the main study. In the end this was not a problem because the forum blocked me and I could not use these posts anyway. However, in my initial ethical decisions, I suggested I safeguard such students by identifying them and asking my Staff Tutor (line manager) responsible for student grouping to allocate them a different tutor. I planned to tell my Staff Tutor that I knew the student and would not be comfortable teaching him/ her, therefore my Staff Tutor also could not identify them as part of my research. On reflection, I felt this was not fair to the students or to myself. Although I could see by eyeballing the data, that some of my own students had posted, it may be several months into a module I was teaching before I would realise the full extent of my own students’ participation. I was concerned that further disruption to students (recent changes that had been made to OU policy had impacted negatively on my students) was unfair. I contacted the ethics board and asked if I could change my ethical approval form to simply read that I would not use any students’ data who were connected to me in any way. This was approved as an appropriate solution. The consent message in the forum was modified to account for this.

\textsuperscript{23} Text redacted: see appendix 5.
3.6.5 Data security

All data is currently held on a password protected computer and the data will be destroyed once the EdD is completed. I have a back-up disc that is also password protected. All original files are in NVivo, which is also password protected. The paper copies are in my study, where only I have access and these will be shredded when the study is complete.

3.6 Procedure

The procedure section has been split into data gathering and analytical procedures.

3.6.1 Data Gathering Procedure

The first decision I had to make was how to scrape my data from Facebook. Initially, I did not try to use NCapture (the NVivo tool used to import data) because it did not work in the pilot study. However, because of an update I ended up being able to use it. Before realising this, I considered copying and pasting all the data from the forum into a word file, tidying it up and then putting it into NVivo or using screenshots, but these ideas seemed impractical in terms of time. I decided to return to the ‘keyword’ idea from the pilot. There seemed to be clear advantages here in that the data would target the areas I wanted to research and help me answer my overall research question. It was an important starting point because it allowed me to deal with cumbersome and unmanageable data. I recognise parcelling up the data in this way is a form of early interpretative coding, however it should be noted I revised my research questions after I had analysed the data, to suit what I had found. Also, I had already read through all the data posts and the keywords related to what I knew the threads were generally about. The keywords allowed me a ‘way in’ to complex data. It is, of course, possible some interesting interactions may have been missed. I decided practicalities needed to be prioritised. In hindsight, because I ended up downloading duplicate (and sometimes triplicate/quadruplicate) threads it would have actually been better to download them in date order (see discussion for further details).

Chosen keywords can be seen below. These were chosen as ‘common sense’ choices from reading the data overall and informed by the pilot.
### Table 2 – Terms used to identify suitable threads from the forum\(^2\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original question</th>
<th>Research key words</th>
<th>Order of search</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do distance-learning students discursively construct learner identities in a module-related Facebook forum?</td>
<td>The answer to this will become apparent through the answers to the sub-questions.</td>
<td>Through overall analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What subject positions do students take up when discussing their learning in a Facebook forum?</td>
<td>These will become apparent when the sub-questions are analysed.</td>
<td>through overall analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do students manage blame in accounting (or not) for their learning?</td>
<td>“marks”, “fail”, “pass”, “lecturer”- 0, “tutor”, “hate”, “love”</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do students manage dilemmas in discourse? For example, how does a student manage/account for results that they claim are unexpected?</td>
<td>‘lecturer’, ‘tutor’, ‘family’, ‘busy’</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do students account for staying/leaving the course?</td>
<td>“leaving the module”- 0, “leaving the course”- 0, “leaving”, “had enough”, “withdraw”, “what’s the point?”- 0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do they account for stress related to studying?</td>
<td>“stress”, “anxiety”, “can’t do it”- 0, “fear”, “afraid”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^2\) The research sub-questions were refined after the data was analysed.
I used NCapture to download each thread into NVivo. Firstly, I clicked on all the ‘view comments’ in the Facebook forum thread, so all data could be seen. I then downloaded each identified thread into NVivo. Each term was bolded out in Table 2, to remind me I had searched for this word. Single words were entered into the search engine as words, but phrases had inverted commas around them.

3.6.2 Analytical Procedures

Data was then read through several times, noting points of interest and keeping in mind my research question(s). The next step was general coding. I allocated threads into nodes (sections in a file) in NVivo. I then classified these coded threads by making folders in NVivo. This process works from the bottom up, so the interaction came first, then the initial code and then the category code. Categories are not always ‘bound’ or set in stone and did develop over time, as the analysis deepened. Examples of interaction also cross over category boundaries.

I then had a general overview of my data. For the micro-analysis, I examined how psychological issues were managed in the forum discourse (for example, emotion, stress and identities). This involved printing off and re-ordering the threads in date order and going through each thread, summarising them and micro-analysing the data. During this phase, I took notes on how students were performing identity. I wrote on the threads and in a notebook, highlighting different ways students positioned themselves in the forums, using discursive analytical tools (see appendix 3). This analysis informed my results. I then made lists of patterns, counting how many incidents appeared for each pattern.
This informed my final analysis, along with the NVivo coding. I also made a mind-map of all my concepts and allocated instances of concepts from the data to the different sections in the mind-map. There were many similarities between the NVivo and pen-and-paper analysis, which suggests the research was robust. I also used the next-turn proof procedure, which means that interactions are attended to in ways that can justify the coding of the data. I then returned to my research question and sub-questions and analysed how all my information was connected to these. Research questions evolved as a result of the analysis, as is acceptable in this type of research (Wiggins, 2017). The complaints chapter was approached slightly differently. For this chapter, I isolated all threads which had a complaint in them and then discursively analysed their openings, progression of the complaint and closings.

In discursive analysis, findings are iterative, so the analysis and write-up stages are interlinked. I began my write-up and then chose suitable quotes as I wrote. I had various limitations due to my ethical concerns. For example, some threads have ‘blanked out’ data in places where people had not given consent for their quotes to be used. I could only use certain quotes, not always the most informative ones. However, as DP is really based around discovering instances that illuminate understanding of the research questions, I felt I had enough to work with.

3.6.3 Robustness of data analysis

Data can be corroborated in several ways in DP. The response of a participant can be seen as enough in itself to corroborate data. For example, if a researcher claims something is an invitation, this can be accounted for by the next turn being an acceptance (Potter, 2003). Another way is to identify deviant cases, which are data segments that are not the same as the overall pattern of the data. Because they can be identified, this suggests that there is a pattern of data in the first place. These systems were used and referred to in the analysis. Another way to substantiate the robust nature of data is to discuss findings among a group of researchers who regularly code. Sample data was presented and discussed at SEDIT (Scottish Ethnomethodology, Discourse, Interaction and Talk (group)) and general agreement was reached. Several talks were given presenting the data as well, at staff and international conferences. Questions and discussions revealed that my analysis was transparent and sensible (see the discussion for further information). It should also be noted, however, that this analysis is very much situated in the time and place of this particular forum and that results can in no way be generalised to all students.
4 Analysis 1: What identities do distance-learning students construct to ask for help, support and advice in a Facebook forum and how do they do this discursively?

4.1 Introduction to the analytic chapters

The following three chapters (chapters 4-6) present the findings from my research. Each chapter addresses different ways students do identity work in the forum. Previous literature will be woven into the analysis for comparative purposes and brought together at the end of the chapter. Further implications of the findings from all chapters are discussed in chapter 7. Each chapter will cover one of the research questions (see below).

1. Chapter 4: What identities do distance-learning students construct to ask for help, support and advice in a Facebook forum and how do they do this discursively?
2. Chapter 5: What identities do distance-learning students construct to offer help, support and advice in a Facebook forum and how do they do this discursively?
3. Chapter 6: How do distance-learners open, build and close complaints in a Facebook forum?

For the purposes of analysis, the asking, and offering of help, support and advice has been separated out into two chapters for clarity. However, in practice the two are interlinked (asking for and receiving help, support and advice). It is also important to define what is meant by help, support and advice, although there is often no clear separation in the discourse between these. For the sake of clarity, this thesis defines the three different terms as follows:

- Help: when posters ask for direct help to find things (which is allowed) or for what to include in an assignment (which is against university rules).
- Advice: when posters are asking for advice related to the TMA/EMA or modules but not actually asking for direct help.
- Support: when posters ask for or offer back up or encouragement.

When asking for help, advice and support, it is usually offered. If it is offered, we can accept it has been discursively successful, as the students orient to the help, support or advice as important.
This chapter will look at which identities students draw on and construct to ask for help, support and advice. Firstly, though, the chapter outlines some background information on the forum. It is useful to have an overall map of how the forum develops over time to help understand the analysis as a whole.

4.2 Summary of forum posts by month

The following list explains what is happening in the module and the forum over the period of time it takes place. It is useful because it illuminates the ‘life-cycle’ of the module.

25 (4 threads)

This is the month before the module begins. Students introduce themselves.

(11 threads)

This is the month the module starts. Topics are mostly around module materials, where to find things online and highlighting problems encountered when studying.

(19 threads)

In xxxx, the first assessment is due, so the bulk of the posts are taken up with concerns about the assessment and the results. There is discussion about the collaborative forums26 and their usefulness (or lack of usefulness). The group are often supportive to each other, but not always.

(6 threads)

Discussions revolve around problems with studying and module materials. There is a thread on what is and is not ‘allowed’ to be discussed in the forum regarding assessment.

Up until now in the forum, engagement has been quite low. However, this changes in xxx as pressure builds in terms of module assessment.

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25 Dates redacted: see appendix 5.
26 Collaborative forums are OU forums where students go to discuss their work and work through academic activities. In this module, these forums are moderated by tutors and some are used for assessment purposes. Students are supposed to take part in them, but many do not.
(25 threads)
The xxx\textsuperscript{27} TMA\textsuperscript{28} is due. The posts mostly relate to completing and submitting the TMA and waiting for marks. There is consideration of the next assignment and some comments on the collaborative forums again.

(32 threads)
The month begins with the return of TMAxx and students discussing their marks. Several have done worse than expected and there is discussion around leaving the module/degree for an alternative academic pathway. Students discuss assignments, extensions and rules and sometimes, inaccurate information is shared. When the TMA is complete, students celebrate, commiserate and worry about their marks being returned.

(27 threads)
Discussions are ongoing about TMAxx, but there is also some consideration of wider OU rules and issues, such as funding and grading. Discussion on TMAxx begins. This is a non-compulsory TMA which causes much debate. Students complain about the late return of TMAs and being unable to get in touch with tutors. Some complain because maths is included in the module. Several discuss leaving the module.

(54 threads)
Tension is building in the forum. Discussions on TMAxx — the ‘unmarked’ TMA — continue. The module has a lot going on at this point in time. Students have an iCMA\textsuperscript{29}, TMAxx and xx are coming up and they are starting to discuss the EMA\textsuperscript{30}. There is some complaining about the final assessments being so close together. There is confusion over module assessment and the overall scores, and rumourmongering does take place. There are complaints about word-limits, tutors and the module in general. Students ask for direct advice from each other on what to put in assessments but are rarely given answers.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{27} TMA numbers redacted: see appendix 5.  
\textsuperscript{28} A TMA is a 'tutor-marked assignment'. Students have five to complete on this module.  
\textsuperscript{29} An iCMA is an ‘interactive computer-marked assessment’.  
\textsuperscript{30} An EMA is an ‘End-of-module assessment’. The assignments gather weighting as the module increases, so TMAs are more highly weighted towards the end of the module. The EMA is worth 50\% of the overall grade. All the other TMAs and iCMAs are worth the other 50\%.}
Some students are still awaiting feedback from a previous assignment and there is encouragement from others to complain. There is a lot of stress demonstrated, as the final TMA and EMA are looming. Students complain about conflicting information from tutors and OU systems. However, there are also examples of humour.

There is discussion around final marks and how necessary it is to do TMAxx. This module is a pass/ fail module, in that results do not count towards the final degree classification. If students get 40% or 100% on the two components (the TMAs and EMA), they still get the same overall degree result. Students spend a lot of time discussing if they might be better just concentrating on the EMA, usually blaming time constraints. Many say they are putting in minimal effort to TMAxx, if they are going to complete it at all. However, when this TMA is returned, there is shock over better-than-expected marks.

Motivation is drawn on as a concern among the students. They report word-counts to justify how they are getting on (or not) with their assignments. EMA discussions include how to get started, which option to choose (there are two) and what to include.

Students go on to discuss their next module and how many students on these new modules have already started studying (as evidenced from another Facebook group). They express concern that so many have been posting about how far ahead they are, while this group are focusing on the EMA. Later in the month, EMA ‘panic’ sets in and there are clear examples of students ‘doing’ stress and then relief when it is all over.

EMAs are complete and the module is finished. The posts mostly concern waiting for results. There is discussion around ‘pending’ results and marks when they do arrive. Students account for their grades positively and negatively.
4.3 Introduction to the analysis in this chapter

This chapter demonstrates the nuanced distinction between what it means to be a student and what it means to be a student asking for help, support or advice. Unlike previous work into support forums, such as Horne and Wiggins’ (2009) and Varga and Paulus’ (2013), there seems to be little need to work up an identity of ‘student’ in the same way as one would have to work up the identity of an initial poster to a suicide or grief forum, demonstrating shared knowledge of ‘being a student’ is oriented to in the discourse. Shared knowledge, used in the sense of ‘pragmatic intersubjectivity’ (Edwards, 1997, p.114-115) is information that participants treat as shared rather than in the cognitive sense of information that participants assume is in the others’ heads.

With this in mind, seven identity types emerged from the analysis (see below). It should be noted that the numbers in this list do not refer to importance. The numbers are there to show that these are patterns and not isolated incidents.

- Seeking information (the seeker) 136 examples
- Doing struggling (the struggler) 68 examples
- Doing anxiety (the stressed student) 56 examples
- Doing frustration and desperation (the desperate Student) 51 examples
- Using humour to gain support (the joker) 44 examples (see appendix 5 for a numerical breakdown of humour posts)
- Doing panic (the panicker) 33 examples
- Doing procrastination (the procrastinator) 22 examples
- Doing obsession with work (the perfectionist) 20 examples

The analysis uses a discursive psychological approach to explore how these identities are worked up, drawing on discursive psychological tools (see appendix 3). These tools are used to construct the identity of ‘a student entitled to ask for support’. Clearly, asking for and receiving support go hand in hand, and, while the offering of support will be mentioned here, more detail will be covered in chapter 5. It should be noted that the analysis is not focused on student intention. The research is interested in what manifests in discourse and does not claim students are making attempts to achieve certain actions. Throughout the analysis, literature drawn on to illuminate, support and develop our discursive understanding of student support forums, includes that on forum identity, accountability and laughter. Details of these papers can be found in the literature review (chapter 2).
4.4 The seeker

Of the identities that emerged, the seeker was the most apparent, and accounted for 136 posts. This commonality was also the case in Chau and Lee’s (2017) research, which showed when students were interviewed about their behaviour in a formal educational Facebook forum, they agreed they were seeking information. In my forum, the seeker is constructed as in need of information and advice, help or support. Seeking information overlaps with the other identities which works to gain that help, support or advice. Again, this fluidity of identity was also shown by Chau and Lee’s (2017) study. However, Chau and Lee were using discourse centred ethnography and interviews. My research, on the other hand, gathered data in an informal forum with no structured tutor interference. The forum was for support, not teaching. It is therefore interesting that a similar identity was most emergent, albeit from different perspectives and my research extends this by focusing on action, rather than classification.

This section will draw on two examples of ‘doing seeking’ – the confused seeker and the humorous seeker - but most of the examples throughout this chapter are about seeking information in one way or another. The seeker often is constructed as confused about specific issues relating to OU systems and instructions. Extract 1 is an example of ‘doing being confused’ which results in gaining information. The seeker is accountable in that they have to justify why they need the information they need.
4.4.1 The confused seeker

Extract 1

Celia asks what learning outcomes are, as she has been told to refer to them by her tutor. She builds up an accountable identity of seeker, which results in the offering of information. She draws on the state of confusion to make her request. She offers an answer to her own question, which works as mitigating face: she cannot be accused of not trying to find the answer. She justifies seeking this information – she has looked but failed to find.

There is evidence that this request for information is treated by Miranda in an accusatory way or may be read as such. Miranda accuses Celia of inappropriately using the forum, through her tone of incredulity and use of the intensifier ‘surely’, and the interrobang. The ‘Xx’ somewhat mitigates Miranda’s stance from helper to supporter as ‘Xx’ can be used to show friendliness. However,

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31 Throughout the screenshots, redactions have been made. See appendix 5 for details.
32 Gender assumptions, based on names given in the forums, have been made for ease of analysis.
Miranda does offer appropriate help and suggests Celia get in touch with her tutor to clarify. Penny backs up Miranda, but in a kinder tone, which works to construct her as a more supportive poster than Miranda. This is emphasised by the use of the smiley and the emphasiser ‘definitely’. In the fourth turn, it could be argued that Miranda is backtracking her construction of frustration. Her previous comment is downgraded and the accusation of not being kind and supportive, especially in light of Penny’s supportive message, is avoided, although the simple thanks from Celia could suggest otherwise.

This one-word response from Celia, four hours later prevents the drama from escalating. Celia does not say she will take the advice, however, which is similar to Morrow’s (2016) findings on depression, where posters thanked people for advice but did not say they would take it. This post shows us that directly asking for help is a way to achieve help, but that it needs to be managed carefully, so students are not accused of being ‘useless’ and unable to find the information themselves. It is possible that Celia was not as successful here as she could have been.

4.4.2 The humorous seeker

A more successful way of positioning oneself as a seeker may be done by using humour. Beach and Prickett (2017) demonstrated that patients used humour to laugh at their selves in serious situations and it is interesting to see that humour does something similar in this forum, especially given that studying is not life-threatening, like cancer. In the following extract, Hilda's use of ‘haha’ is treated as laughing at herself. It works to avoid an accusation of being lazy or using inappropriate participants in her experiment, and to gain support and advice. Possibly, the humour also works to mitigate the stressful situation she is in, just like Beach and Prickett’s (2017) participants.
Hilda says her question ‘feels silly’ positioning herself as uncomfortable asking it and unsure on whether she has done the right thing. The ‘haha’ lightens her constructed worry and embarrassment. Arguably, the invitation to laugh is upgraded here when she moves from discussing her problem to ‘coffee time’ with a wink. She draws on the shared knowledge that coffee time means break time. The invitation to laugh via self-deprecatory humour is extended in the final turn where Hilda’s ‘haha’ constructs her as laughing at her own over-thinking. The second use of the ‘haha’ in the third turn constructs Hilda as again able to laugh at herself and do relief and gratitude that she has an answer. Humility here, gains support.

What is important so far is that drawing on the ‘seeker’ identity means answers to problems can be offered. These answers may be offered in different ways, possibly depending on the other drawn on identities. Hilda, for example, draws on the joker, struggler and seeker identity. Celia draws on the psychological states of confusion and anxiety. Celia’s request is treated more scathingly than Hilda’s and perhaps using humour may mean a kinder response.
The second most frequent identity to emerge when asking for help, support and advice was the struggler.

4.5 The struggler

A successful way to gain help, support and advice is to draw on a struggling identity. Struggling was a successful identity to draw on in Lamerichs and te Molder’s (2003) research into depression forums, and in Horne and Wiggins’ (2009) work, where posters had to convince people that they were genuine in their struggle with suicidal feelings. This section examines three ways of struggling: struggling with academic work, the word-count and motivation.

4.5.1 Struggling with academic work – seeking support

In the following discussion between Sylvia and Penny, like other support forums, positioning oneself as struggling serves as an invitation to another to offer support.

Extract 3

*Sylvia*

Seriously hating this tma! Not grasping it whatsoever. Keep looking at all my notes and not making any sense... really need a kick up the backside to get it done, but with struggling it’s giving me no motivation 😞 yaaay 😞. Do we cite and reference this one as well? X

3 Comments  Sealed by 150

*Penny*

We are almost done. You can do this. Just start writing. Write what you know and go from there. You may be amazed what you actually know. Good luck and you can do this!

Like · Reply

*Penny*

Oh forgot to add that the discussion does need to be properly referenced.

Like · Reply

*Sylvia*

Thank you!! I just seem to be procrastinating! Back to school tomorrow so hopefully less distractions! 😊
Sylvia builds an identity of a ‘struggling student’, which opens up the request for help. She draws on this category in the third line of the first turn making it relevant to her request. Emotion discourse, emoji and idiom build this position further. The intensifier ‘seriously’ and the use of the exclamation mark work to construct Sylvia’s identity as a genuine struggler with her TMA. This is developed with the extreme case formulations (ECF) of: ‘looking at all my notes’ and that it’s ‘not making any sense’. It is unlikely none of Sylvia’s notes make sense, hence the ECF. ECFs as Edwards and Potter (1992) argue, bolster accounts and justify argument, and were also common in Horne and Wiggins’ (2009) paper, where posters posted extreme stories of pain, full of ECFs which resulted in gaining help.

Sylvia’s struggle is built further with the colloquialism and idiom ‘kick up the backside’. This use of idiom is similar to Cranwell and Seymour-Smith’s (2012) findings, which demonstrated that idiom was successful in avoiding challenges to weight, post bariatric surgery. In this case, the idiom works to convince others Sylvia is not managing her essay and she gains support. She also does not tell us which part of the assignment she is struggling with, or which parts are not making sense (drawing on systematic vagueness) and this constructs panic (see also section 4.9), develops the ‘struggling’ position and opens up the request for support.

Just like Petitjean and Morel (2017) uncovered in their research, laughter here closes and manages interaction. The positioning of the emoji and ‘yaaay’ closes the topic, before moving on to a request for direct help (‘Do we cite and reference this one as well?’). The ‘yaaay’ is sarcastic, but humorous too, which constructs a student who has not lost her sense of humour, despite her struggle. At the end of her post, the X does friendliness and warmth and a pre-emptive ‘thanks’ to anyone who may respond with support.

By doing all of the above, Sylvia has worked up the identity of ‘the struggler’ and she does get a response. Her posts are treated as requests for support and as entitlement to moan. Penny replies with ‘We are almost done’ then shifts her footing to ‘you can do this’ — emphasising that Sylvia can complete the module. Through consensus, Penny positions Sylvia as a member of their ‘group’ and ‘we’ works to encourage Sylvia to continue. Penny works as ‘the supporter’ (see section 5.4). Sylvia's struggle is minimised to something more manageable with ‘just start writing’. All she has to do is write. This use of consensus is seen throughout the data and is frequently used in support forums, where people tell ‘second stories’ (Paulus and Varga, 2015) which demonstrates understanding, and empathy with the original poster’s position.
The third turn, as supplementary information is interesting, as Penny’s message is adjusted to add in extra information. It could be Sylvia built up her initial account so that she could gain some advice on referencing, but Penny treats this as an afterthought. Penny treats Sylvia as requiring this information, by explaining that she does need to reference. So, we can see how Sylvia’s construction has not only gained her support but help too.

In the final turn, Sylvia’s struggle is minimised in several ways. Firstly, she thanks Penny for her help and support, which constructs her as a good, polite person (Brown and Levinson, 1987), deserving of such support. Then Sylvia downgrades her struggle by blaming herself and drawing on the position of procrastinator (see section 4.10). By signing off with a big smiley face, she thanks Penny and is positioned as ‘better’ and that the crisis has passed. Messages of ‘thanks’ were apparent in Morrow’s (2006) data on depression. Morrow pointed out that the ‘thanks’ messages did not mean that the advice would be acted on. We have no reason, however, to suspect that Penny’s advice here will not be acted upon. Using emoji to end a thread could be compared to Holt’s (2010) work, which showed that laughter can be used to end a sequence in talk. It could be argued that, in a similar way, the smiley emoji closes this topic.

In summary, this post has demonstrated that drawing on the position of struggling with academic work and motivation a poster can gain support. We can also see an example of struggling with motivation in the following example.

4.5.2 Struggling with motivation: the group struggle

In the following extract, Kevin’s position as struggling with motivation gains support, via consensus. The rest of the thread also draw on struggling identities which builds a communal group struggle.
Kevin’s humorous post is treated as an invitation for his fellow students to join him. He claims he has only ‘written 2 words’ and is ‘not even sure about them’. The humour is reminiscent of Beach and Prickett’s (2017) research where humour was used to deal with stress and the students here
are also drawing on the stress identity. The second turn here is interesting. Hutchby and Wooffit (1998) argue that the preferred response to self-deprecation is disaffiliation, so it would be expected that the preferred response would be disagreement. However, the responses are affiliative. The self-deprecating humour in the first turn opens up a bandwagon for others to join and create a discursive support platform. Jimmy’s post, through consensus and upgrades, constructs his own situation as even more desperate and the ‘ha’ builds the self-deprecating humour further. Sylvia also draws on the struggling identity by reporting the number of sentences she has done, claiming she has ‘had enough’ and wants to do the EMA instead. The frowning face emphasises her struggle. This corroboration and upgrading do support by suggesting the group are ‘in the same boat’ (see section 5.4.2 for a detailed discussion).

Kevin updates his struggle later on (we are assuming there must have been a time-lapse between his first and second post). This time, he draws on a ‘coping’ identity by claiming he has more words and he is getting through the work. There is no use of humour here. Instead, Kevin accounts for his position of managing his work by explaining that he has to do this TMA because he missed one previously. Jimmy replies, returning to the struggling position. He claims he has not started because he keeps re-reading material and the affect display of ‘urrgghhh’ emphasises his struggle. Julie’s later ‘argh’ mimics this which further suggests corroboration and a ‘group identity’ of strugglers. Kevin then offers advice, in response to Jimmy’s request, by pointing him to useful module materials. Kevin’s struggle has become Jimmy’s as Kevin moves fluidly from the ‘struggler’ to the ‘helper’ (see section 5.2).

4.5.3 Struggling with the word-count being too long

As can be seen from above, drawing on the word count is a useful strategy to gain support. In this module, word-counts are strict and operate within a 10% leeway: students face penalties if they exceed 10% of the given word count. The following extract also draws on the word count and again it can be seen that humour is used. This time, though, the struggle with motivation is not constructed as such a problem. Instead, Hayley constructs herself as struggling by complaining that the word-count is too long and gains support.
Hayley begins by positioning herself as ‘irritated’ bolstered by the frown emoji. Venting is apparent, which builds the complaint. Venting, or ranting (Edwards, 2005) is frequently seen in a complaint sequence. Complaining is dealt with in more detail in chapter 6. ‘Irritation’ is an emotion state, which Edwards (1997) explains are drawn on to justify complaints to manage accountability. By complaining about the word count, Hayley positions herself as struggling, but justifiably so, doing ‘it’s not my fault’. Positioning oneself as ‘not at fault’ was also apparent in the discursive literature on depression (Morrow, 2006) and weight management (Wiggins, 2014) where participants would blame other things for their depression and weight.

It is also interesting that there does not seem to be any need to work up an identity of an irritated and annoyed student, unlike previous research into support forums where an identity had to be worked up to post. Hayley launches into her attack straight away. Her attack is corroborated by Penny suggesting that using irritation to complain is an acceptable discursive practice in the forum. Previous work has shown that identity needs to be cautiously built up before gaining support (for example, Mudry and Strong’s (2013) work into gambling and Horne and Wiggins’ (2009) work into suicide). The reason for this could be that there is no need to convince others that they are a student of the module and therefore entitled to post.

On saying that, it is questionable if Hayley would have received a response to her message had it been left at ‘feeling irritated’. Hayley works up why she is feeling irritated, which gains support. Hayley’s post is treated empathetically by Penny. The post is treated as ironic. This can be seen with the comment on the word count, which is not a ‘joke’ but Hayley ironically claims it is. Systematic
vagueness, with ‘harp[ed] on’ and written ‘something about an xxxx’. 33 allows for little availability to contest this position. Vagueness (Edwards and Potter, 1992) can be used to make a position difficult to challenge. We can see that from the response, Hayley’s position of justifiably struggling is not challenged but bolstered via corroboration. Some students do use vagueness to dampen down their knowledge in university tutorials (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006), so it is interesting that the vagueness convinces others that Hayley’s position of ‘hard-done-to’ student is justified, rather than students in face-to-face tutorials using it in response to being praised for doing well academically.

Without knowing the module, the xxxx and humour could be missed, which demonstrates how shared knowledge is drawn on to position the module as accountable for Hayley’s irritation. Hayley draws on the ECF of ‘the worst’, which further convinces people of her struggle. With the repetition of the word ‘joke’, the annoyance is enhanced.

Finally, the apology at the end of the first turn works to avoid accusation of going too far with the ‘rant’ and to mitigate her stance. Hayley presents herself as having regained her self-control. She is not the unreasonable person here. Again, this makes the module and not Hayley accountable for her actions. It is interesting that this comes in the first turn. In the literature, there are examples of people apologising after they have been ‘reprimanded’ (e.g., Lamerichs and te Molder, 2003) but not (that I am aware of) in the same post. This pre-emptive apology, along with the use of the colloquial ‘guys’ works to position Hayley as a rational person, and not one given to excessive or irrational rants. She has been placed in this position by an unreasonable and irrational demand (the word count of this TMA). This is reminiscent of Lecouteur and Oxlad (2011) where a man claims his violent actions towards his partner are accountable to her behaviour and that he suspects she is having an affair. The man also claims his actions are a rational response to an irrational situation. It is interesting that the discursive pattern used here, when allocating blame, is similar. Hayley blames the module and positions herself as ‘not at fault’.

Hayley’s position of struggling student works and gains support. Penny does consensus, aligning to Hayley’s account, claiming she feels exactly the same. She too constructs herself as struggling,

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33 Reaction of content of EMA: see appendix 5.
34 Redaction of EMA content: see appendix 5.
claiming that the only reason she is submitting is so that she can re-sit\textsuperscript{35}. The analysis of support work through consensus analysis can be found in chapter 5.

These exchanges suggest that corroborating and doing ‘mutually struggling’, is an appropriate discursive student identity used to gain and offer support. This type of struggling is not something that is done alone but constructed together. The struggle emerges from the discourses and positions available. Students can draw on commonly held meanings and understandings to gain support.

It would seem then, that an effective strategy to gain help, support and advice, is to draw on the position of non-academic strugglers, over either the module content, motivation and/or the word count. Discourses of struggle mean students can seek information in various ways. They are both seekers and strugglers. The next most recurrent category was the anxious and stressed student. It makes sense that, drawing on the emotion discourse (Edwards, 2005) of anxiety and stress would be a useful strategy to convince others of the need for support.

4.6 The stressed and anxious student

The analysis so far has shown that positioning the self as struggling can achieve the offer of support, help or advice. Drawing on the emotion discourse of stress and anxiety also gains support. The following extract is an example of this, from Penny. Hepburn and Brown (2001) showed in their research into teacher stress that stress was an emotion category invoked to account for teacher behaviour and we can see that Penny invokes the stress emotion to vent about her work and account for her problem in a similar way.

\textsuperscript{35} If students want to re-sit, they have to get a (very low) threshold mark, so it is important to submit something.
Penny begins by claiming she is ‘all colours of stress’ — drawing on the psychological concept of anxiety straight away — and that she is also desperate and struggling. The ECF of ‘gotten nowhere’ convinces others of her stress, as well as the three-part-list — ‘frustrated and stressed and blah!’.

The ‘blah’ as a general extender (Overstreet, 2019) further builds Penny’s stress as it demonstrates she is in such a state she is unable to find the words to complete the list. Like the teachers in Hepburn and Brown’s (2001) work, the emotion category of stress accounts for Penny’s venting.

Penny’s stress is then downgraded. The tension drops – she says now that she has ‘ranted’ she can focus on her work. This works as an apology, like Hayley’s in the previous extract. There would
appear to be a pattern of apologising in advance in this forum. The repetition of ‘very’ still draws on the category of ‘genuinely stressed out’, but positions Penny as calmer.

This stressed identity attracts support through corroboration (see section 5.4.2). Demi aligns with Penny but her problem is that she has a xxx which is contrasted with academic work as much more inviting than writing an assignment. The thread ends on a lightened mood, with a wink and smile emoji, constructing Penny as appreciating the support and as understanding the xxx upgrade.

Posters attend to Penny’s stress by aligning with her. However, Penny still has to account for working earlier than some students might be. Demi, for example, claims to have not even started. It could be argued Penny does this by drawing on the position of ‘busy person’. She is not only a student but has another life to contend with as well, suggested by her comment that she is ‘hoping that life will settle enough’. This discourse works to position Penny as an ‘ordinary’ OU student who must juggle other demands too. This accountability is similar to Flinkfeldt’s (2011) research, where people on sick leave had to account for why they were doing things they may not have been expected to be doing. They did this by justifying everyday activities as ones that were difficult. Penny explains how starting early is necessary, as ‘life’ gets in the way of studying, thereby preventing accusation of being too far ahead.

Stress and anxiety, as can be seen above, is closely connected to frustration and desperation, and this is where we turn next.

4.7 The desperate student

Frustration and desperation are emotive words. The following extract is a good example of the use of such emotion discourse (Edwards, 1997). Edwards (1997, p.143) explained that people use ‘routine, recognisable patterns’ in talk to make their emotion accountable.

36 Redacted data: see appendix 5.
37 Redacted data: see appendix 5.
As can be seen from above, again from Penny, the discourse is full of emotional terms with the recognisable patterns and idiom such as, ‘I just want a pass’ and ‘big old baby’. Drew and Holt (1988) explain that idioms are difficult to challenge. Penny manages the accusation of being a ‘good student’ – after all, she has started her assignment a week early – by using idioms like ‘losing it’ and ‘plod on’. ‘Plod’ is something we do when we are dragging our feet through heavy mud so emphasises Penny’s struggle. Penny builds her request for support by positioning herself as desperate, frustrated and at risk of madness (‘losing it’). The desperation is emphasised by ‘nothing’ left and ‘no desire’. The story that she cried like a ‘big old baby’ works to convince others further of desperation and the straight face emoji constructs her as ‘serious’. The metaphor of the baby positions her as helpless and in need of care. She continues asking for advice by drawing on the metaphor of boxing constructing herself as strong in the face of adversity, further emphasised with the metaphor of ‘I won’t throw the towel in’. Like a boxer, she will keep fighting to the end. Using a metaphor of fighting, in resisting the urge to
gambles, was also demonstrated in support forum requests (Mudry and Strong, 2013). All this works to create the image of a laden-down student who is struggling to keep going and needs support. The final, desperate plea of ‘all I want is a pass’ works as a ‘cry for help’, which Roberta treats as such. ‘Cries for help’ do appear in other support forums, such as those on self-harm (Smithson et al., 2011) and suicide (Horne and Wiggins, 2009). As stress is connected to mental well-being, this could account for discourses of desperation also being evident in a forum where students are discussing their work.

Because Roberta advises Penny to just write something and then she can do something with it, we can accept this frustrated and desperate identity works as a cry for help. Roberta draws on her own experience, positioning herself as a motivated student and as ‘the encourager’ (section 5.4.3) who also struggled, but then overcame it by ‘just starting’. The use of ‘wtf’ (what the fuck) further supports Penny as it preserves face as Roberta manages her own capable identity and convinces Penny she just needs to ‘get it done’. Roberta continues by convincing and supporting Penny by advising if she does the EMA in sections, she will get there. She finishes off with an ‘x’, which does friendliness and constructs Roberta as an advisor, not a show-off, or being overly academic. Penny’s cry for help has achieved its purpose.

Further advice comes from Roberta in extract 8.

**Extract 8**

Roberta: I also just put ‘reference’ in commas when writing it then went back after final edit (chop!) and added them in so I knew what I had with word count etc.

Penny: Thank you! I needed the pep talk. I honestly believe I may be making it more than what it is. I’m going to sit down tonight after everyone is calm, and just start writing. I’ve read the chapters. I know what they say, I just need to quit being so blasted silly and start typing. I’ll be so glad when this is over.

Samantha: You can do it... 😊

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Penny’s positioning of ‘just wanting a pass’ (a student who is not that academic) has led to a ‘pep-talk’ and advice. Penny responds to Roberta’s advice with appreciation, a ‘Thank you’ and her previous identity of desperate is downgraded to something more rational and reasonable. Penny’s over-reaction (‘being so blasted silly’) is contrasted with ‘start typing’, like Roberta has suggested. In Morrow’s (2006) research, ‘thanks’ was shown to be used in thanking someone for offering advice on depression and then reasons for the thanks were offered. Similarly, in this example, thanks are given, before explaining why the thanks is appreciated. Roberta’s discourse has talked Penny down from her frustration and desperation, however, this management is contradicted, when Penny claims she will be ‘glad when it is over’. This opens up the thread for further support with ‘you can do it’ and a smiley face from Samantha. ‘You can do it’ is a common phrase drawn on in the forum. The above example is the typical response pattern of this type — a student draws on a frustrated and desperate identity, gains support and then thanks the supporter.

As previously mentioned, the identities discussed in this thesis should not be seen as separate entities. So far, it has been evidenced that seekers of support, can construct themselves as struggling, stressed, frustrated and desperate all at the same time. However, the students are not always serious, and the identity of the joker is also frequently constructed and drawn on which has the result of gaining support. Previously we saw this in extracts 2, 3, 4 and 5. Now this identity will be discussed in more depth.

4.8 Being funny: The Joker

This section draws on two examples to illustrate how being funny works in terms of asking for support, one about the ‘technique’ of repeating words to reach the word count, and one about being stuck with an assignment.

4.8.1 Joking about word repetition

In the following extract, people attend to Lizzy’s use of humour as a request for support. This was also seen in Beach and Pickett’s (2017) research, where people were under stress about their health. Writing a TMA is stressful, as students are opening their work up to criticism. Therefore, it is interesting that humour is also used in this (comparatively less) stressful situation.
Although Lizzy is constructed as struggling with reaching the word-count, the humour positions her as able to find laughter in this struggle. In a tongue-in-cheek tone, Lizzy jokes that one way to deal with a short word-count is to repeat a phrase over and over again. The ‘mmm lets see ha!’ convinces others that she is using humour and not being serious. Like Holt’s (2010) work, ‘ha’ terminates the turn (although not the topic, as it continues in the interaction below). The ‘ha’ makes it clear that Lizzy is engaging in self-deprecating humour, as does the affect display of ‘mmm’. Furthermore, as Holt’s (2010) paper points out, when others laugh at self-deprecatory humour, it can suggest alignment and that is precisely what happens here. It is also possible that Lizzy is using humour and the affect display ‘mmm’ to resist academic identity by constructing herself as ‘bending the rules’ to try and find a way to make the most out a desperate situation. She is using the academic language of ‘xxxx’ (drawing on the xxxx repertoire) yet follows it with ‘mmm let’s see ha!’. This is reminiscent of Benwell and Stokoe’s (2002) research into student dynamics in a tutorial, where students used humour to resist and downplay academic identity.

The humour opens up the thread for a response and Lizzy’s struggling, joker identity is given (humorous) support.

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38 Phrase redacted: see appendix 5.
39 Text redacted: see appendix 5.
The joke is continued here on the 4th and 5th turn. Rebecca takes it up by sharing her ‘trick’ of meeting the word-count by writing out the full xxxx name, rather than the word ‘xxxx’\(^\text{40}\). Using laughter for irony was also noted by Stokoe et al., (2013), where a student’s use of ‘haha’ as an ironic token constructed the tutorial he was about to attend as really not ‘a blast’. Lizzy does a similar thing on turn 5, where an ironic ‘haha’ allows the readers to understand that making up the word-count just by repeating lots of words is not really clever. This could be taken as an insult, but the ‘haha’ works to convince the reader she is not serious. Lizzy continues to build her joker identity by explaining she will be ‘told off’ for using too many words, but claims, as would a class joker, that she does not care. The ‘don’t care’ downplays the seriousness of the situation (not being able to reach the word-count) and constructs Lizzy as one who is again, resisting academic identity. Overall, in this thread, the struggle, yet joking identity drawn on to reach the word-count gains ‘help’, albeit in a tongue-in-cheek way, and support, as others construct themselves as supporting her struggle by clicking the ‘like’ button.

4.8.2 Joking about an assignment stopping one from cleaning the house

The next post from Rhona, builds an identity of struggling and yet again, uses self-deprecating humour, via the ‘meh’, laughter emoji and affect displays, such as ‘gah’. Rhona needs to manage a dilemma here of why someone who is so good at essays is looking for support. The dilemma is managed by claiming on the one hand, she has always been pleased with her assignments on submission, suggesting she is a good student, but on the other, she ‘cannot do’ the EMA. Again, we can see how Edwards’ (1997) work can be applied, as emotion discourse - ‘gah’, ‘happy’, ‘terribly’, ‘stress’– accounts for Rhona’s struggle. Furthermore, the chapters and the word limit are blamed.

\(^{40}\) Redacted text: see appendix 5.
Beach and Prickett’s (2017) research is echoed here, where once again, humour is being used to manage a stressful situation. It is interesting that humour is used to manage stress on forums as well as verbally, as most previous discursive research into support forums has uncovered more serious patterns (possibly because the topics are more serious). Like Paulus and Lester’s (2013) study, students in this forum do not boast about being good students, suggesting that students can build similar identities in both tutor-led and student-led forums. It makes sense not to boast about being a good student if you want help. Rhona draws on identities other than student here. She is also someone who needs to clean her house. She is doing being an ‘ordinary person’. It could be funny because it is shared knowledge that no-one wants to clean their house as it is a mundane task, and that Rhona’s post provides evidence of the misery and time the assignment has taken: it is so intense that people have not been able to clean their house. The point is not whether Rhona has cleaned her house or not: the point is that this emphasises the pain of essay writing. The smiley face tells the audience that Rhona is laughing at herself and it is treated as ironic. Eva questions ‘clean house? Yep
can relate to that’ which again constructs the essay as something that has meant that students have been unable to keep up with the basics of living.

Eva also supports Rhona via corroboration by explaining that she can do it, and by using the idiom ‘order will be regained’ suggesting that cleaning one’s house is akin to ordering one’s life and that the chaos of studying will end. The three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) of ‘celebrate, breathe, relax’ has a calming effect. Via humour and drawing on emotion discourse, Rhona has gained support.

Building on the evidence so far, this section has demonstrated that humour, as well as struggling, and constructing identities of anxiety and desperation are all ways to seek support. Another pertinent identity that emerged from the data that led to support was the panicker.

4.9 Doing panic: The Panicker

Managing deadlines is part of what it means to be an academic and it could be argued these students are using the forum to work through emerging academic identities and learning how to survive academic life. Panic is most evident around EMA time. This section looks at three examples of student panic. Panic occurs when deadlines are looming and the use of emotion discourse (Edwards, 1997) is extensive. The forum provides us with opportunities to see the construction of panic being done as it occurs. I could not uncover any research that focused on the discursive construction of panic, although there were similar examples in Horne and Wiggins’ (2009) and Wiggins et al.’s (2016) research into people constructing identities as imminently suicidal and being taken back from the edge. The following examples show how panickers construct themselves at the edge of their studying tolerance and as such, act as ‘cries for help’.

4.9.1 Using humour to do panic

Constructions of panic are not always done seriously though and can draw on the identity of joker, using elongated vowels and expletives. This can be seen in the following extract where Nicola is positioned as panicking.
The affect displays are notable here. The expletive ‘bloody’ and detailing – ‘3 hours, 900 words’ – bolsters the panic. The affect display of ‘ahhhhhhh’ mimics a scream. The post is short yet remarkably detailed. Nicola is positioned as, and constructs herself as genuinely stuck, again reminding us of how ‘doing being genuine’ is built up in previous work (Horne and Wiggins, 2009; Paulus and Varga, 2015). Nicola’s appeal attracts several responses where students list their word-counts (a direct answer to her question). There is further panic as Rhona brings in the 10% over-the-word-limit leeway.
Rhona draws on the identity of ‘panicker’ by making it relevant to the discourse – there is a plea to find out about ‘the 10%’. Nicola, humorously, treats this as not a real problem, with ‘screw the 10%’ demonstrating that now, at the end of the module and the forum life, using such colloquialisms is acceptable. The discursive culture of the forum is already in existence and rules are understood. The use of ‘lol’ helps to position Nicola as still friendly, as this post could possibly (although unlikely) be read as antagonistic.

When Nicola does not offer help, Rhona reiterates her question, escalating her desperation for an answer. The discursive panic, given the looming deadline (which is usually at midnight) is strong. This is emphasised by the speed of the posts. They are posted within minutes of one another. This quick succession means the students are attending to the urgent nature of the posts. Just as quickly the urgency builds, however, the tension is released, as Verity provides an answer – with a simple ‘yeah, you are’ and ‘xx’. Rhona has been brought back from ‘the edge’ much like those in suicide forums (Wiggins et al., 2016). This is not to minimise the pain of suicide, but to emphasise the perhaps surprisingly common discursive practices that occur in support forum work when stress is apparent.

This example shows that drawing on the identity of panicker fuels more panic from other students and fires up drama. Such panic can lead to errors and confusions but may also lead to help and answers when required. It is fascinating because in applying discursive psychology, we can see the evolution of a panic played out in real time in written discourse.

4.9.2 Panic over letting go

The following example shows panic in the initial post, and once again, additional panic later in the thread. From the beginning, Eva, having made the deadline, constructs herself as ‘scared to send’ her TMA. Others treat her post as a request for support to submit. Again, Eva’s detailing of her situation builds the panicky construction. She explains how many words she has and that she has checked her referencing. Eva is finished in advance of the deadline (compare the dates here – the xxxx- to above – the xxxx) so could be accused of being too far ahead and therefore not justified in asking for help,

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41 Time stamps on the screenshot have been redacted: see appendix 5.
42 Dates redacted: see appendix 5.
but the worried emoji helps mitigate against this. Eva is treated as a genuine student with a genuine fear.

Extract 14

1,537 words done, referencing checked. Why am I so scared to send? 😐

Sophie: Well done! Have you done part 2 as well?

Sophie: I reckon I will forget lol

Rhona: Let it goooooooooo let it gooooooooo la la la la la la la la 😁

Part 2?

See translation

Like · Reply · 2 ·

Sophie: Lol

Like · Reply ·

Eva: Part 2?? huh? i have a scrambled brain right now, my proof read it and pointed out simple mistakes, so now 5 words later i think its done... but part 2? please let this be a simple got ya! lol

Sophie: Lol. Oh, wait a minute, you must be doing a different EMA to me. I don't start this module until

Like · Reply ·

Sophie: I'm doing module and then this. You must be just finishing module

Like · Reply · 1 ·

Eva: you almost gave me heart failure, if i was american i would be calling my lawyer hahahahahaha x

Like · Reply · 2 ·

Sophie: Lol. Sorry!

Like · Reply · 1 ·

Eva: 1578 words later after seeking outside viewings. Sent, crapping myself. But thank goodness it is over. Good luck to those still doing x
Eva gains support from Rhona (see turn 4), who draws on ‘Let it go’, a song from the film Frozen with a smiley to work to convince Eva to submit, alongside elongated ‘oooo’s’ and ‘la la la’. Rhona draws on the helper identity and the situation is lightened with humour. Elongated vowels denote how the receiver should hear the words, like in Flinkfeldt’s (2011) data, where ‘booooooongreeeed’ was typed with elongated vowels which constructed the participant’s emotional state. The panic then builds, as the topic shifts focus to ‘part 2?’

When Sophie asks if Eva has ‘done part 2’, Eva’s following post denotes confusion. Eva’s new panic is constructed with the use of three question marks and the ‘huh’ as a shortcut to ‘what are you talking about?’ Like the previous extract, these posts are short and quick, with possibly overlapping typing and posting, which could have enhanced the confusion. Eva does ‘being reasonable’ by metaphorically claiming she has a ‘scrambled brain’ — a lovely idiom of an overworked brain being like scrambled eggs — managing the dilemma of being offered the incorrect information and constructing herself as possibly at fault, not Sophie. Sophie is not accused outright.

We see a good example of repair in action here. Sophie must repair having offered the incorrect information. To do this, the drama is downgraded, as Sophie explains that she has the wrong EMA. She justifies her mistake by claiming that she has not started the module Eva is studying. Sophie uses ‘lol’ four times to demonstrate she is laughing at her mistake and not at Eva. This prevents Sophie being accused of creating panic and havoc — she made a genuine mistake. Humour is used to further downgrade the drama, as Eva justifies her relief, using the idiom that she ‘nearly had heart failure’ and building the joke that she would be phoning her lawyer if she was American. The panic is over.

In the final turn, around three hours later, Eva updates her status and still positions herself as scared, but this time as relieved as well. She claims she has submitted her assignment, but that others (‘outside viewings’) gave her some advice and she reworked some of it. A delicate balance needs to be managed here as there is a dilemma — she claims she did not take the advice and ‘let it go’. Like other forums, advice has been offered but not necessarily discursively accepted (Morrow, 2006). Eva says she is still afraid of the result (‘crapping herself’) but is relieved ‘it is over’. The wishing others luck works to prevent accusations of not taking the advice, finishing too early and being too good a student and hence saves face.
4.9.3 A panicker who does not gain support.

Sometimes, however, panicking posts do not gain support, as can be seen from the following extract.

Extract 15

Jane

gaaahhhh shouldn't have left this so late, I hate chapter none of this shit feels relevant. plenty to say on chapter 5 lines on chapter urgh!

On the face of it, this post is very similar to extract 12. The poster is visibly doing panic. The affect display of ‘gaaahhh’ straight away constructs a desperate identity and last minute panicker and grabs the audience’s attention. The poster draws on the identity of procrastinator by claiming she hates this part of the module and uses an ECF in that ‘none of this shit’ seems useful. The sentences/phrases are short and quick, like extract 12. The position is backed up, by claiming there is more to write about on another chapter and concludes with the further affect display of ‘urgh!’ to reinforce her irritation. But - there are no responses to this post. Could it be because when she posted no-one was able to give an immediate response (we can see that 86 people saw the post at some point)? Or is she not convincing enough in her panic? Or is it too early to panic, given that extract 12 was posted around 24 hours later and gained attention?

Constructing oneself as ‘having left it too late’ and ‘panicking’ may or may not gain support and advice and can also lead to further panic. We can see that responses tend to be fast, suggesting several students are ‘in the same boat’. Panic may also be connected to procrastination, which is where we turn next.

4.10 Doing procrastination: The procrastinator

We have seen in the previous examples that students must be convincing if they are to gain support. This section will look at how students do procrastination. Procrastination is used both negatively and
humorously. In Stokoe et al.’s (2013) research, it was found that students had to manage a delicate balance between being academic and the socially acceptable side of being a student. Doing procrastination could be one way of managing this same dilemma. This section, through the use of two examples, shows how drawing on the identity of procrastinator is a way to convince others you are a ‘typical’ student and gain support. Support offered when constructing a procrastinator identity, tends to be through corroboration (see section 5.4.2).

4.10.1 Facebook as a tool used to procrastinate

Extract 16

What is it about sitting down to catch up on your reading when you're weeks behind that suddenly makes Facebook the most interesting thing ever?!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Like</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ellie</td>
<td>Procrastination!!! , I'm the queen of it haha!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylvia</td>
<td>Exactly what I'm doing as well! Also using 'too much sun' as an excuse as well haha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellie</td>
<td>Guilty of that too! It's a wonder I ever submit work ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celia</td>
<td>liked your post because i too avoiding by being on fb lol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Haha..me too..😊</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Asking for support as a procrastinator involves managing a dilemma. Students need to manage the possibility of being accused of being lazy if they are to gain support (and in this case, share laughter) in the forum. Similarly, it could be argued if they are not constructed as genuine in their procrastination struggle, they may not gain support. Previous literature has shown, albeit on more serious topics, how people attend to the genuineness of their identity on suicide forums (Horne and
Wiggins, 2009) and gambling forums (Mudry and Strong, 2013) otherwise there may be repercussions including a lack of acceptance into the forum. In Rebecca’s case, if she isn’t genuine, people may attend to her as a malingering or a liar, so she has a stance to manage, much like the participants in Flinkfeldt’s (2011) study into sick leave. Rebecca begins by constructing herself as being ‘weeks behind’ and using Facebook as a further procrastination tool. This convinces others she wants to complete her module on the one hand (she is sitting down to do the reading) but is not doing the work on the other. Humour and common understandings of ‘student procrastination’ mean an offering of support. The rest of the posters corroborate, doing all ‘in the same boat’ (see section 5.4.2). The upgrading in Ellie’s post, metaphorically positions her as the ‘queen’ (of procrastination) and the affect displays of ‘haha’ and ‘lol’ enhance the humour. There is nobody better at it than her. Sylvia corroborates further through the additional excuse of ‘too much sun’. Ellie’s corroboration and upgrading are done by claiming that she is such a procrastinator, it is a mystery that she ever gets work in. The alignment is further done by Samantha, who concludes that she too is on Facebook. Through humour and appealing to common understandings of what it means to be a procrastinator, Rebecca gains support via corroboration.

4.10.2 Using work as a reason for not doing assignments

Related to procrastination may be asking for extensions. I expected to find a lot of extension request posts, but there were surprisingly few. When students do discuss asking for extensions in the forum, they need to manage a dilemma and justify why they need an extension, to convince others they are not procrastinating, otherwise they may not get the support they need. Here we can see an example of a student wanting to ask for an extension because she has work commitments. Again, we can see a pattern of understanding that being an Open University student means your life has many different components. It could be argued that Annie is attended to as being a genuine OU student, in that she wants to do her work but is prevented from it because she must make a living.
Instead of procrastination being an acceptable stance, Annie rejects this identity and draws on a hardworking identity instead. Her need for an extension is justified by claiming she has just started a business and is busy working over the weekends. Using ‘you see’, addresses the reader directly, and works further to convince others that she genuinely needs an extension and that she is not a bad student. The two xx’s help to manage her stance and do friendliness. She is advised to ask her tutor, so does gain help from others (posts cannot be used for ethical reasons).

Overall, some students construct procrastination as not unusual and part of being an Open University student. Sometimes delaying work is constructed as for genuine reasons, as not procrastination but unavoidable. At other times students draw on the state of procrastination for humour, which in turn leads to humorous support from others that are in the same boat. This is reminiscent of Flinkfeldt’s (2011) research on sick leave, where people had to account for not working, but being able to do other activities (such as exercise). Activities other than work were constructed as undesirable, which allowed for affiliation. In extract 17, activities other than studying are not constructed as undesirable but necessary and normal. In this way, students remove academic identity from the equation and instead draw on their other identities (worker/ mother/ carer etc.) which works to justify them not studying.

To recap, in seeking support and information, students draw on positions of struggling, anxious, desperate, panicking and procrastinating, as well as humour. One final position was identified and that was the position of the obsessive, which is where we turn next.
4.11 The Obsessive

From my literature search and some of the previous examples, it was evident that students sometimes position themselves as not academic, either on or offline (Selwyn, 2009; Stokoe et al., 2013) or as ‘ordinary’ (Paulus and Lester, 2013). When students did position themselves as academic, this created a difficult discursive dilemma to be managed (Benwell and Stokoe, 2002) and they had to account for the discourse that had already taken place. In my research, there were 20 examples of initial posts containing constructions of obsession, which would suggest that there is something different about the discourse of this group of students when compared to those researched before. The obsessive student positions themself as worrying excessively about their assignments either before or after submission. Positioning oneself as obsessive is often treated as an effective way to gain support, but not always. Offerings of support can be seen in the extract below, where Rhona draws on the obsessive identity as she explains she has been checking her work post submission.
4.11.1 A catastrophic mistake

Extract 18

When you find a catastrophic mistake after the deadline 😥😭😭😭😭

Celia omg what's happened??????

Rhona I've basically phrased something in a way that makes a 1/3 of a paragraph wrong. 😫

Rhona It's just one word that needs to be replaced with 3 words but it changes the meaning of everything 😢😢😢

Like · Reply ·
Rhona opens with a pre-announcement which works to build panic and develop her entitlement to ask for support. This pre-announcement reads panicky, desperate and afraid, but does not reveal what mistake has been noticed after the deadline. The pre-announcement works as an invitation, inviting posters to ask what the mistake is. She begins with, ‘when you find a’. Frequently, people begin threads on social media with pre-announcements like this. Such posts are treated as shared knowledge of social media etiquette and shared knowledge of something that ‘everyone’ understands. Such phrases build humour and invite solidarity. Rhona’s post constructs her as an obsessive as she admits to checking work after it has been submitted. The ‘catastrophic’ ECF works to enhance Rhona’s worry. The five ‘floods of tears’ emoji add to the drama and the humour.

This pre-announcement works. Celia asks quickly what happened, reinforcing the drama, emphasised by use of ‘omg’ (oh my God) and the five question marks. Rhona then downgrades by explaining that she has phrased something in a way she did not really want to, which means a small part of her assignment is ‘wrong’. The emoji this time constructs Rhona as still panicking, but calmer. She has been taken back from the edge (Wiggins et al., 2016). Just getting a response seems to minimise her panicking discourse. Then, later in the thread, the catastrophic rhetoric returns as Rhona rebuilds her
‘obsessive student’ identity, claiming a ‘silly error’ has ‘ruined it’ - the ECF of ‘ruined’ emphasising the panic. It is unlikely one mistake has ruined the entire assignment. Beryl interjects, drawing on reason. By contrast and perspective, Beryl's discourse works to convince Rhona not to resubmit her essay. Firstly, it will be classed as late, which automatically attracts a penalty. Secondly, she draws on contrast by explaining that in opposition to Rhona’s panic, the error is not a catastrophe and it will not mean failure. Celia offers support by telling Rhona to contact her. The use of emoji, the ‘big hugs’ and the kisses in both posts construct Celia and Beryl as caring students who genuinely want to help. Doing being a panicking obsessive, in this case, gains support.

This picture of an obsessive student who cares deeply about what she submits is in contrast to students in previous research, who have positioned themselves as ambivalent (Benwell and Stokoe, 2002). However, the situation here is very different. Instead of being in a tutorial situation, where saving face may be more appropriate, these students are in an online forum where the culture of the forum, at this point in time, is one of support. These students are on the last lap of their module, and stakes are high, as the EMA is worth a large proportion of their marks. It is possible stakes are not as high in a tutorial.

Sometimes constructing oneself as ‘the obsessive’, however, does not gain help, support or advice, as can be seen in the following extract.

4.11.2 Reporting obsession

Extract 19

Penny

done...two not sure on...but sitting on it for some stupid reason. Too scared to send it at this point. I may go back and check out those questions to see if the answer comes to me. Now to fight 😞. I am going to be glad to be done with this part of this module.

Like Comment

Seen by 87
Again, here, Penny draws on the obsessive identity by justifying why she is ‘too scared to send’ her xxxx\(^{43}\) – she is a checker. Unlike the previous post, Penny does not receive any comments, although she does get some likes. It is possible (although there could be a myriad of other reasons) that sometimes drawing on obsession constructs students as too perfect and not in need of support. Penny is not checking after the deadline, unlike Rhona, so her obsession may be treated as less urgent. Also, she does not use a pre-announcement, unlike Rhona, so the discourse is not opened up in the same way. Penny also identifies a strategy, claiming she will go back and check things later, which may suggest she is not in need of support. It could also be people are too busy to offer support, or that this post is more of a status update, or that she does not request support firmly enough. Furthermore, the xxxx\(^{44}\) is not as ‘high stakes’ as some of the other assessments (especially the EMA) so people may be wondering why she is panicking in the first place. Finally, by positioning TMAxx\(^{45}\) as a battle and that she is looking forward to the end of the assessments Penny constructs herself as capable and capable students are not in need of help the way panicking ones are.

Doing obsession serves the discursive function of sometimes gaining support, but sometimes not. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to conclude why this might be, although we can speculate, as above. There is also a possibility that just posting is support in itself and this has important implications for what support is effective for students. Perhaps students do not need responses, but just writing it down and ‘getting it out there’ is enough.

4.12 Conclusions

This chapter asked, ‘what identities do distance-learning students construct to ask for help, support and advice in a Facebook forum and how do they do this discursively?’ The chapter has outlined eight identities students draw on in asking for help, support and advice. These are the seeker, the struggler, the anxious, the desperate, the joker, the panicker, the procrastinator and the obsessive. In Chau and Lee’s (2017) research, similar discourses were found, where students were seekers of information and asked for support. However, the identities uncovered here, in a student-led, rather than tutor-led Facebook forum, suggests informal Facebook forums are treated as places where people go to specifically gain support. Furthermore, the forums are built on the shared knowledge

\(^{43}\) Name of assignment redacted: see appendix 5.
\(^{44}\) Name of assignment redacted: see appendix 5.
\(^{45}\) Name of assignment redacted: see appendix 5.
that this is what they are for. There is no need to build up an identity of student, just different ‘sub’ identities of students, which leads to different types of support being offered at different times. Drawing on the sub-identities to seek help, advice and support usually gains it, but not in every case.

Although these students are constructed as reluctant students in places, such as when they draw on the identity of procrastinator and struggler, they are also positioned as caring deeply about their studies as demonstrated by the panicker and obsessive identities. Stokoe et al., (2013) found that students in different settings would construct themselves as having done minimal work and preparation for their academic lives, which is contradictory to some of my findings. This may be because the students in my study are OU students – typically mature and living apart from one another. Perhaps they do not have to manage the social face of being a student to the same extent. However, the students do not build identities as overly academic. Instead, like Selwyn’s (2009) research, the students often construct themselves as in need of support. This would make sense, given that a knowledgeable student would not be treated as needing support and would arguably have no need to post in the forum.

It was interesting that there does not appear to be a need to work up the category of student. Unlike Stommel and Meijman’s (2011) research into forums, where people needed to work up a convincing identity of having an eating disorder, it was taken for granted that these students were all studying the same thing at the same time. This is evidenced in the trouble in extract 14, where Sophie inadvertently posts on the wrong forum. It may well be that unlike previous research, joining a support forum for an OU module may be as simple as clicking a button. However, posters do need to make themselves accountable in asking for support and do this by drawing on the sub-identities exampled above. By doing ‘it’s not my fault’ (such as in Stokoe and Hepburn’s (2005) research into neighbourhood complaints and Morrow’s (2006) research into depression) the students account for their study-related problems. Other aspects of life and study are blamed, such as the module, the materials and paid employment (see chapter 6 for work into complaints). Sometimes emotion discourse works to further build the entitlement to support.

It is also interesting that the students treat the forum as a support forum in similar ways to previous work on depression and suicide forums (Morrow, 2006; Horne and Wiggins, 2009; Wiggins et al., 2016). Sometimes, for example, the students’ discourse on this forum can construct crisis points and similarly to previous research, posters are then talked back from the edge. Panic and stress are treated as ‘online rescue missions’ (Mishara and Kerkoff, 2013, cited in Wiggins et al., 2016, p.3).
This is not to say everything is completely serious, however. Humour is extensively drawn on in the forum and has the function of relieving stress, usually over assignment-related issues. This is reminiscent of Beach and Prickett’s (2017) research into the use of humour in doctors’ surgeries on cancer. Humour is demonstrated both in the discourse and also with the use of emoji and laughter tokens (haha, for example).

Coughlan and Perryman (2015) found that OU students find Facebook useful for their studies, and this research would suggest that this is the case. Facebook forums are places students can go for peer-to-peer support and may be the only place they can go for this, given the nature of being a distance learner. In this sense, Facebook forums can be seen as helpful places, where students can develop their knowledge and understanding in both being a student and of their module. Such forums are not immune from problems, of course, but given the nature of their studies it may be the best option available.

I deal with the applications of this research in the final chapter, but it is useful to flag up some important implications here, so the direction of the thesis can be appreciated. Having workshops or tools based on the CARM-Text (Stokoe, 2014) method for students could offer them support in engaging with and understanding Facebook dynamics. This could lead to an understanding of the types of discursive strategies that gain support and how to work through trouble on social media. For staff at universities, this research could raise awareness of the discursive work that is taking place on Facebook and the function of these forums. For the OU in particular, it is important to realise such forums are performing important functions for distance learning students that cannot be met elsewhere. On Facebook, students can work through what it means to be a student, and gain support and advice in as close an environment to ‘real life’ with their peers, as is realistically possible.
5 Analysis 2: What identities do distance-learning students construct to offer help, support and advice in a Facebook forum and how do they do this discursively?

The previous chapter examined how different identities are drawn on and built by students to ask for help, advice and support. In this chapter, the focus is on how help, advice and support is discursively offered. There is inevitable overlap between this chapter and the last one as asking for and offering help, support and advice are mutually interactive. However, these have been separated out for ease of analysis. It is also important to note that both solicited and unsolicited advice and support occurs in the forum.

5.1 Introduction

Offering help, advice and support were all apparent in the data. The three categories have been classified as follows

- **Help**: when posters offer direct help to find things (which is allowed) or for what to include in an assignment (which is against university rules).
- **Advice**: when posters offer advice related to the TMA/EMA or modules but not actually offering direct help.
- **Support**: when posters offer back up or encouragement.

This chapter outlines seven different discursive identities drawn on to offer help, advice and support. The categories that emerged can be seen below. As with chapter 4, these are examples of recurring patterns, and although illustrated with few examples, this was deemed appropriate because of space. Help and advice emerged as separate categories, whereas the supporter category has several subcategories. Again, these identities feed into each other, but for the purposes of clarity of analysis, have been split up here. Definitions of the different types of identities will be developed in the analysis. The categories are:

- **The Helper** (offering help to others in terms of direct information) 115 posts
- **The Advisor** (offering advice to others) 385 posts with one deviant case presented.
- **The Supporter 1 - The Reporters** (offering support by giving a ‘status update’) 517 posts
• The Supporter 2 - The Corroborators (positioning self as ‘in the same boat’, for example) 498 posts
• The Supporter 3 - The Encouragers (persuading others to keep going, often using idioms) 152 posts
• The Supporter 4 – The Fantasists and Jokers (where students create visions of escape from problems and/ or use humour to offer support) 62 posts
• The Supporter 5 - The Sympathiser (doing sympathy for students who are having difficulties) 50 posts

One deviant case has also been identified
• The Rule Stickler (not offering help as a result of ‘sticking to the rules’)

When offering help, advice or support, students have a dilemma to manage. If the wrong help or advice is given, there could be repercussions. It has been found students will minimise knowledge before offering advice (Davis and Lester, 2016) and explain they got information second hand (Lester and Paulus, 2011), to avoid accusations of being wrong. Depression forum research suggests that offering advice needs to be done in a certain way, if it is to be accepted by the initial poster (Morrow, 2006). Second stories (Wiggins et al., 2016; Varyeda and Antaki, 2009; Cranwell and Seymour-Smith, 2012; Paulus and Varga, 2015) are commonly used to convince others of the veracity of accounts, before offering help, advice or support. Idiom, such as ‘listen to your body’ (Versteeg et al. 2018) is another technique used to justify help, support or advice. Paulus and Varga, (2015) uncovered that initial posts are sometimes treated as requests for advice, even if explicit ‘asking’ is not apparent. These studies will be drawn on throughout this chapter to demonstrate the complexities involved in support forum discursive work.

5.2 The Helper

Although the identity with the largest number of posts was ‘The Reporter’ (the first sub-category identified as being part of the supporter identity - supporter 1, in the table above), I decided it would make more sense to deal with the helper first, then the advisor, followed by the different identities that emerged as supporters. This means the structure of the chapter is similar to chapter 4. This section examines how students offer help by giving other students practical information to support their studies. The following three examples show how the dilemma of offering information but not
being too knowledgeable, in case the information is wrong, is sometimes managed by hedging. At other times, the information given is not hedged, but reported with conviction.

5.2.1 Offering help using hedging

In the following extract, there is an example of offering help by hedging using second stories, research and reported speech (Lester and Paulus, 2011).

Extract 20

The first turn is an example of a second story as it is actually a response to a first post about the word count, which for ethical reasons cannot be shown here. The request for help comes in the second turn. Helen tells another ‘story’ – she is also short of words and uses a direct appeal for help, demonstrating urgency. She wants to know if there is a penalty for not reaching the word count. The initial response to Helen’s post is an advice post (see section 5.3) and uses the hedging technique of ‘I dont (sic) think’ to preserve deniability. Helen then replies with thanks and ‘I couldn’t
find anything’, using the formulation that she tried, but it just did not work. This works to justify her need to ask for help.

The actual ‘help’ comes in the penultimate turn, where Linda also hedges her knowledge, by using ‘for what was said to us at my last tutorial’, which marks the following information as coming from someone else, just in case Linda is incorrect in her information. It has been shown that doing being knowledgeable as a student is unusual in formal academic online forums (Lester and Paulus, 2011) and it would seem a similar construction is found here in an informal forum. To convince others her knowledge is factual, Linda explains that at a tutorial she was told that being under was not as much a problem as being over the word-limit. That way, if something goes wrong and the opposite construction is offered, Linda cannot be at fault. Her position is justified by convincing others that she was told being ‘clear and concise’ is more important than reaching the word count. Hedging was also common in other support forum research such as that into self-harm (Smithson et al., 2011) and suicide (Horne and Wiggins, 2009), suggesting that sometimes offering advice is delicate even if the topic is not life-threatening. However, hedging was not always used when offering help, as can be seen in the following examples.

5.2.2 Offering help using both hedging and no hedging

Sometimes students do not hedge information when offering help. In the following extract, Hermione begins by drawing on the positions of confused (see section 4.4.1) and desperate (see section 4.7) to ask for direct help in a TMA. The use of questions and her direct appeal of ‘can anyone help me’ positions Hermione as unsure. Such a position does gain direct help from two posters, who do this by partially using consensus.
As previously found by Davis and Lester (2016) students would minimise knowledge which worked to hedge before offering advice. It can be seen here hedging is done with ‘I’m sure it’s been said’ to manage being accused of the information being given as not actually correct. The ‘I’m sure it’s been said’ is akin to reporting on second voices (Lester and Paulus, 2011). It is another voice, even though we do not know who this voice is. Celia corroborates with Rebecca in the third turn and uses ‘defo’, to back up Rebecca’s post (see section 5.4.2). Celia does not use hedging, unlike Rebecca. This extract could also be read as an example of possibly offering conflicting information (Celia does not say that xxxxxxxxx[^47] is needed). There is no response from Hermione, which suggests Hermione got what she was looking for, either from the post or elsewhere. It is apparent that both hedging and not hedging occurs when offering help in this forum.

[^46]: Redacted text: see appendix 5.
[^47]: Redacted text: see appendix 5.
5.2.3 Correcting inaccurate help

A possible interpretation of the above extract is that the two helpers are offering slightly different information. In the following extract, there is an example of offering conflicting information and of help ‘gone wrong’, but this time a more delicate move is demonstrated, which manages this discursive trouble. Sally enquires how to reference something. She is constructing herself as struggling (see section 4.5) and confused (see section 4.4.1), not only with the referencing, but with the assignment as a whole. This positioning of struggling helps her gain offers of help, however, unlike the previous example, the initial response has no hedging.

Extract 22

Sally

How do we reference and in text?! There doesn’t seem to be a year after their names in the text books!? Finding this essay soooo hard 😞😞

Rebecca

The year is just the year that the book was published x

Ellie

I think that as you only read it a a secondary source then you only have to reference their name then cited in the book you read it in with the year of the book you read !

Rebecca positions herself as the helper, offering Sally information on how to reference but there is no hedging – just a statement. However, Ellie challenges Rebecca’s position. Ellie corrects Rebecca’s incorrect information, by explaining that Sally needs to use ‘cited in’. Ellie must manage a dilemma here. She must give Sally the correct information without offending Rebecca. By using the phrase ‘I think’ she hedges and saves Rebecca’s face of being potentially wrong. If Ellie is wrong, she can claim she was not sure, which works to avoid offence. This may suggest these students have respect for each other, in terms of offering help and avoiding conflict.
Another example of helpers not hedging their response can be seen below, where again, the helper offers direct help. It is possible that the lack of hedging here is due to the confidence of the helpers in offering the advice, or the desperate nature of the initial posts, or that Facebook forums allow for quick ‘soundbites’ of information. In the previous two initial posts, the urgency of ‘can anyone help me’ and the series of questions and exclamation/emoji use in both posts, constructs the posters as desperate, which may mean a definitive reply is offered. We also see this desperation in the following post, where Jenny says she is ‘really stressing out here’. This is similar to Hermione’s ‘totally confused’ and Sally’s ‘finding this essay sooo hard’. These intensifiers make the posts seem urgent.
Jenny uses a narrative style to open her post, again drawing on the identities of confused (see section 4.4.1) and desperate (section 4.7). She must manage a delicate dilemma between getting help and not asking for inappropriate help, because of ‘Facebook Forum rules’ (see The Open University, 2017). Jenny works up this complex identity by justifying her right to post and using a disclaimer — that assignments cause her stress. The disclaimer works by positioning her as
someone that is justifiably in need of help. She draws on her academic side by claiming she knows what to write, usually, which convinces others she is trying, but this time she is stuck. The use of emoji emphasises her confusion. This ‘I’ve tried but I can’t’ formulation is seen in each of the previous examples and can therefore be concluded as an effective strategy to gain help.

This build-up of confused, desperate and stressed student works, as John then offers direct help, with no hedging at all, like in Celia’s and Rebecca’s posts above. He uses a second story, explaining what he has done, and gives Jenny an essay plan. Sandy also uses a second story and picks up on the identity of helper further by convincing Jenny to go with John’s plan. Sandy also advises her to include other information. Sandy builds this entitlement to offer help by aligning with Jenny, explaining she was in the same position as Jenny at the start. Sandy’s use of ‘lol’ constructs her as friendly and/ or laughing at herself. She goes on to explain she is clearer in what she has to do now after reading ‘loads and loads on the internet’. She blames the question for her need to do this. However, there is a return to hedging in Sandy’s post possibly because she could be read as contradicting John. The hedging of ‘but I think’ works to prevent accusations of being wrong. If she is, she can explain it is just what she said she thinks, not ‘fact’. Jenny then messages back, claiming she understands now, (although offers disclaimers of ‘a little bit’ and ‘could be completely way off’), which works to avoid minimising the help she has been given. It is not clear if Jenny’s claim to understanding is as a result of the help offered, or because of something else. It is unlikely she has taken Sandy’s advice in her 500 words, however, given that the posts are only 5 minutes apart. Whatever the reason for Jenny’s gratitude, the crisis has been discursively resolved.

From these examples, in being a ‘helper’ it would appear appropriate, in some circumstances, to hedge to mitigate stance. Students often position themselves as ‘perhaps correct, but not entirely sure’. This is in line with previous research, such as Paulus and Lester’s (2013). Hedging works, as students may avoid any accusations of being wrong in their advice. It also means students are ‘doing being learners’ rather than ‘experts’ and can use this identity to preserve deniability. Second stories are also drawn on to offer help, in line with most other discursive research into support forums (Wiggins et al., 2016; Varyeda and Antaki, 2009; Cranwell and Seymour-Smith, 2012; Paulus and Varga, 2015). However, it is also the case that students do not always hedge and sometimes just offer help as a ‘statement of fact’ without mitigating stance. It is also interesting that there are sometimes no responses from the initial posters to the help offered so there is often no way of knowing if the help has been received or not. This makes us wonder if there is some unwritten ‘rule’
in forums, that means it is acceptable to offer help but not have it acknowledged, which seems
different than face-to-face acceptance of help.

The next section looks at how advice is offered.

5.3 The Advisor

Advice was classified as different than help because advisors, instead of giving people answers, make
suggestions of things people might want to do. It was not always easy to separate the two, but the
subtle difference can be seen through the following examples.

5.3.1 Offering advice by asking questions

One way of offering advice is by asking questions (Butler et al., 2010). By asking questions, students
can help those who need advice, work through their problem. In the following extract, there is an
example of an advice-implementing interrogative (Butler et al., 2010). It is interesting that this
pattern of advice giving is apparent on this student support group on Facebook, as well as in
telephone support between children and advisors. Using questions helps students build an identity of
someone entitled to offer advice.

The following extract begins with Rhona positioning herself as the panicker (see section 4.9) which
works to achieve support. Rhona positions herself as an ‘idiot’ by listing all the things she has left at
her family member’s house, when her EMA is due in a few days’ time. This gains support via
corroboration (section 5.4.2) and suggestions. It is the suggestions that we are interested in here. In
turn 4, Hilda suggests ‘maybe ask your family to return it to you’. This statement could be read as a
question (although there is no question mark), a suggestion or as a directive. This is also taken up and
explicitly formatted as an advice-implementing interrogative by Rebecca with ‘any chance they can
bring it to you?’ Rebecca then asks further questions in turn 6 with ‘is there a computer you could
use at home?’ and ‘could they email the file to you?’ Although Rhona does not explicitly say she has
taken the advice, she does respond, explaining that her xxxx\textsuperscript{48} will bring her laptop to her. It is
possible she has taken the suggestions on board and that the advice-implementing interrogative has
been successful.

\textsuperscript{48} Text redacted: see appendix 5.
What complete idiot leaves their laptop, laptop bag, text book and book of notes an hour from home at a family members when they have an unfinished assignment which is due in 41 hours?

Oh yeah, that would be me.

Rhona

Oh. And a l

Rhona again.

Like · Reply

Ummm, sit and cry and rock in a corner I think!

Rhona

Like · Reply

Hilda

Oh no poor you, maybe ask your family member to return it to you. Bribe them with chocolate and or wine hehe x

Like · Reply

Rebecca

Any chance they can bring it to you? 😓

Like · Reply

Eva

Its times like these i highly recommend vodka! On a positive thought, if you have already made notes you are half way there. Hope you are able to retrieve your stuff in the morning or someone bring it to you x
Unlike Butler et al.’s (2010) research there is no need here to work up to questions, although there is still some hedging going on with the use of ‘maybe’ and ‘any chance’. Also, the advice seems to have been taken here, whereas in Butler et al.’s (2010) research it was often rejected. This suggests that there is something different going on in advice offering forums like these. It may be a result of the power relations being more horizontal (peer-peer as opposed to adult-child).

5.3.2 Offering advice by drawing on ‘factual information’ but being vague.

Offering advice, like help, is a delicate matter and needs to be managed as such. In previous research, vagueness has worked to downgrade students’ knowledge (Benwell and Stokoe, 2002) in academic tasks. Paulus and Lester (2013) also demonstrated being vague in a CMC student task into discussions on vitamins worked to avoid counterargument. Being vague occurs in the following extract. Posts 2-5 have been deleted for ethical reasons, and they were mostly corroborative posts. The advice comes in the final post in this extract. Penny explains that she is ‘way over’ the word-count and justifies her reasons by claiming she ‘hates this’. By constructing herself as a struggling student (see section 4.5) and being systematically vague there is less likelihood of an accusation of being overly academic for doing a second rewrite and having enough words. Others do corroborate, and advice is offered from Eva:
Support has been offered in previous posts, by students explaining that they have the same problem. The corroboration means Penny can now construct herself as relieved as the students have built a group identity of struggling and being ‘in the same boat’. We know this because Penny says ‘good, I am not the only one then’. Penny does not claim she has finished with the chapter, but she says thanks and uses a smiley, in contrast to her earlier serious faces. Advice is then offered from Eva drawing on factual information from the guidance. The vagueness appears with the phrase ‘somewhere in the guidance’. This works to give Eva a discursive ‘way out’. If challenged on where the information is, Eva can claim she cannot exactly pinpoint it. The ‘x’ helps to build community relations and acts a relational marker, so the advice offered is not offensive.
Therefore, being vague is useful when managing the delicate matter of advising, in line with previous research (Benwell and Stokoe, 2002; Paulus and Lester, 2013) into students offering each other advice.

5.3.3 Offering advice by drawing on a second story

In previous research, second stories (Wiggins et al., 2016; Varyeda and Antaki, 2009; Cranwell and Seymour-Smith, 2012; Paulus and Varga, 2015) have consistently been used in support forums to convince others of the veracity of accounts, before offering help, advice or support. The next example is one of advice being offered by using a second story. However, this is an unusual thread, where the advice is offered in a later turn and tutors are supported initially, as opposed to the student.

We saw from chapter 4, that a successful way to ask for support is to draw on the identity of frustrated student. At the start of this extract, Sally builds this identity, as she draws on the emotional state of frustration, at waiting for her marks. Through the disclaimer ‘fair enough’, there is some attempt to construct the self as a reasonable person. Justification of this frustration and irritation occurs through the emphasiser ‘hell’ in ‘a hell of a lot of money’ and the ‘weary’ face at the end of the turn.
What is interesting is that initially, Andrea does not offer help, advice or support. This is an example of a deviant case, because it did not occur elsewhere in the data. The fact it is a deviant case could suggest that this is not an acceptable practice in the forum, as it may threaten the sense of community.
In the second turn, Andrea’s discourse works to convince Sally to see things from the tutor’s point of view. Andrea, a graduate, manages Sally’s dilemma of ‘waiting for marks’, as she explains that tutors are not paid well, and justifies this by suggesting that Sally looks at the website for details. This drawing on of evidence convinces Sally to be reasonable, and that her tutor is not necessarily completely at fault.

The rhetoric continues as Sally also draws on ‘being reasonable’. She accounts for her previous post by explaining she knows tutors do not get ‘all the money’ but as a paying ‘customer’ she should get her results on time. Sally has a dilemma, as she must manage her complaint without blaming her tutor on the back of Andrea’s reasonable comments. Her discourse works to convince Andrea it is impacting on her motivation and therefore, adding to her struggle — building up her entitlement to ask for advice.

It is in turn 4, Andrea’s offering of advice comes, and it is here we see the use of a second story. It could be that Sally’s discourse draws on discourses of desperation and frustration more convincingly in turn 3 than turn 1, which is why Andrea offers advice here, rather than earlier. Andrea positions herself as an ‘experienced student’ and explains that one of the major things she learned xxx was ‘not to get stuck in TMA limbo’. This metaphor offers advice to Sally, that by focusing on the results she is trapping herself in a spatial academic world — between TMA writing and TMA waiting. By drawing on her own experience, Andrea convinces Sally that she had to ‘condition’ herself into being able to move on. This use of the xxx (conditioning) does category entitlement of the xxxx, and therefore further constructs her as able to advise Sally. Andrea then praises her experience xxx, which works to encourage Sally in her studies. She further supports her by telling her not to get demotivated but that she too, will have a positive outcome, drawing on their common understanding of what it means to be an xxx student. She backs these comments up with the affect displays of smileys and a winking emoji. These affordances mitigate some of the previous comments Andrea made, which may be read as antagonistic.

By using the second story, Andrea is attended to as genuinely offering help (like in Horne and Wiggins’ (2009) research into a suicide forum). Sally thanks Andrea and continues, convincing Andrea

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49 Redacted text: see appendix 5.
50 Explanation redacted: see appendix 5.
51 Text redacted: see appendix 5.
52 Redacted: see appendix 5.
of her right to be annoyed. She again draws on the emotion of desperate and anxious about her results but uses the minimiser ‘just’ which excuses the initial ranting post.

This example demonstrates that second stories are also useful in offering advice on topics that are not life threatening (Wiggins et al., 2016), or on health issues (e.g., Varyeda and Antaki, 2009; Cranwell and Seymour-Smith, 2012). It is also clear that second stories and drawing on one’s own experience, are used in informal education related forums as well as formal teaching ones (Paulus and Varga, 2015).

5.4 The Supporter

Now help and advice have been covered, we can move on to discuss support, defined as when posters offer back up or encouragement. Because support is such a large area, the types of support have been further broken down into reporters, corroborators, encouragers, fantasists and jokers and sympathisers.

5.4.1 The reporters

As can be seen from the previous examples, a common way to offer support is by using second stories. It was frequently found in the data that someone would post a small story and there would then be a thread of posts all claiming something similar. The reporters are similar to the corroborators, but sometimes reporting would be done without corroboration, which is why they have been split up here.

An example of reporting can be seen below. This extract occurs around halfway down a thread during a conversation on lack of motivation (the initial post cannot be posted for ethical reasons). It is especially interesting that this thread occurs right at the beginning of the module, when we might assume that motivation would be higher.
5.4.1.1 Reporting on being behind

Extract 27

Kevin started and finished week 1 last night. Onto the proper stuff now. I am a terrible procrastinator but I've really got to up my game this year so I'm just ploughing on.

Like

Jenny I haven't looked at anything yet 😞 starting to worry. Haven't been very well, been though....maybe tomorrow 😞

Like

Kevin Mañana is my usual state of being. 😃

Like · 1

Kevin Bought the book in to read during my lunch but checked out FB & Twitter instead. Idiot.

Like · 3

Penny I started with a lot of motivation, but as it gets closer, my motivation begins to ebb and fade away 😞.

Like · 2

We can see here, that following on from the initial post, Kevin tells a second story about being a procrastinator. He starts off by explaining he completed a full week’s work in one night, which does not construct him as a procrastinator, but as a fast worker. He avoids the accusation of being a good student (having done a whole week’s work in one evening), he claims, through metaphors, that he must ‘up his game’ and ‘plough on’. The metaphors of ploughing and upping his game, construct him as struggling through heavy mud, to get through the work and ‘win’. Kevin’s identity as ‘procrastinator’ in turn 3, works to convince the others in the forum he is usually a ‘take it as it comes’ type of person, as connoted by the ‘mañana’ and the ‘loudly laughing face’. He then draws on the position of ‘an idiot’ because he could have done some studying in his lunch hour but is on Facebook and Twitter — right at this very moment, doing procrastination in real time.
Altogether, there are seven ‘second stories’ in this thread. Two more examples can be seen here – Jenny’s story of having been xxxx\textsuperscript{53} and Penny’s story about losing motivation. It could be argued that Kevin gains support from Jenny, who downgrades his problem (procrastination) as not as bad as hers (genuine reason for not starting). When Penny reports, she returns to the idea of motivation, drawing on more metaphors and explaining that her motivation is drifting away out of her control.

This use of reporting builds the community of students and begins to shape the rules for posting and taking part in the forum. There is no actual advice given. Instead, the stories seem to work as support. This appears to differ from the previous discursive research into support forums where stories were used before offering advice (Paulus and Varga’s (2015) study into grieving and Cranwell and Seymour-Smith’s (2012) study into bariatric surgery).

5.4.1.2 Reporting around TMA return

Sometimes, students would also report on their results. Again, this reporting was not used to offer advice, but more as a ‘sharing’ practice. The following example shows sections from the full thread where the practice of sharing stories takes place. The thread opens with Clara asking if anyone has had their marks back.

\textsuperscript{53} Information redacted: see appendix 5.
Hi everyone as anyone had their mark back for the tma

Jenny: Yes and it was crap lol. But I expected that as I only did part 1
Like · Reply

Jenny: For tma I got less than but I didn’t try much as I wanted to focus more on ema
Like · Reply · 1

Jenny: I only did 470 words of part 1 and missed part 2... lol I really am pass caring now though, can’t wait to hand ema in and forget about it all. I got good marks for all the other tmas so not too bothered
Like · Reply · 1

Ellie: Not yet, I’m still waiting x
Like · Reply

Celia: Me too still waiting
Like · Reply

Julie: I have had mine, I had my best results somehow! X
Like · Reply · 2
There are two different types of reporting going on in this thread. Firstly, there is reporting on marks and secondly there is reporting on stance regarding return of the TMA. Jenny starts by reporting that she got a ‘crap’ mark but justifies this as she only did half the TMA. Jenny uses ‘lol’, which works to laugh at and construct her as not worried that she has not done that well. She then reports on her score, that she got less than xx\textsuperscript{54}, but again saves face by explaining that this was expected. The reporting continues with further details given. ‘Lol’ again, convinces the reader of her stance (that she is past caring), as she has done well in other TMAs. It could be argued Jenny’s discourse is embedded in the culture of the forum, where posts construct xxxx\textsuperscript{55} TMA as pointless if they have already passed the TMA part of the module. Julie also reports on her results but in a much shorter post – she had the best results. This is constructed as a surprise, hence saving Jenny from potential embarrassment of being accused of being too good.

The reporting of return of the TMAs, which is what Clara asked in the first place, is taken up by Ellie and Celia in turns 5 and 6. Ellie says, ‘not yet, I’m still waiting x’ and Celia says, ‘me too still waiting’. These status updates are offering support by drawing on the ‘in the same boat’ metaphor, which although not stated explicitly in this thread, was drawn on extensively both explicitly and implicitly throughout the data. This mirroring and repetition of other people’s words and the use of the phrase ‘me too’ are common ways used to do solidarity in the forum. Cranwell and Seymour-Smith's (2012) research also showed the use of ‘me too’ as a normalising device in responses to those who struggled to eat, post bariatric surgery. In this case, all the students are in the same situation, and albeit not necessarily one of ‘normality’, it is a common experience.

5.4.2 The Corroborators

Corroboration and affiliation can be seen from the use of ‘me too’ above, as well as the practice of sharing common stories. This section picks up on and develops this further by looking at the ‘all in the same boat’ metaphor, both explicitly and implicitly. This metaphor creates an image of all the students together, in a boat, in the middle of the sea, trying to find their way to dry land and the end of the module. In Morrow’s (2006) research into depression forums, participants also drew on the ‘same boat’ metaphor to offer solidarity, when reporting with second stories. Alignment and affiliation were also seen in Adin’s (2011) discourse analytic and corpus analytic research into asynchronous student group work, where students used the ‘boat’ metaphor to commiserate.

\textsuperscript{54} Score redacted: see appendix 5.
\textsuperscript{55} Information redacted: see appendix 5.
5.4.2.1 Doing affiliation by drawing on the ‘all in the same boat’ metaphor

The ‘boat’ metaphor was drawn on 11 times in the data set. In the following example, Penny draws on ‘all in the same boat’ to offer Hermione support. Hermione begins by positioning herself as a busy student, which works to justify why she is starting the EMA early. She is asking for support to get started with ‘really need motivating’.

Extract 29

Really need motivating to get this EMA done. Only really have this week as then have some mega busy weeks with work and kids but just can't seem to get going.

To offer support, Penny’s discourse draws on the construction that she is also a busy student who is struggling to get going and is ‘in the same boat’, matching Hermione’s struggle. Penny tells a second story, which works to convince Hermione she thought she had done more work than she had.
Hermione’s discourse continues to convince Penny that her ‘boat’ is sinking more quickly than Penny’s. This position is justified by claiming she even handed in her previous TMA under the word-count because she was ‘fed up’ of it.

It is interesting that the implicit offering of support here results in an upgrading from the initial poster (a ‘my-boat’s-sinking-quicker-than-yours’ type construction). However, by drawing on this metaphor the students are doing ‘I understand your pain’ and offering support to each other.

5.4.2.2 Doing affiliation to corroborate and offer support

Affiliation was seen throughout the forum. The following two examples demonstrate ways this can be done without explicitly using the ‘in the same boat’ metaphor. In the first example, a more implicit use of ‘in the same boat’ to corroborate, align and offer support, can be seen.

Extract 30

Ellie corroborates with Hermione and complains that the word-count is not enough with a simple ‘I’ll second that’. Again, the agreement and affiliation offer support as the students construct the two of them as being in it together.

From these examples, it is clear corroboration can be done with and without using the ‘in the same boat’ metaphor. Sometimes the metaphor is implicitly drawn on. Solidarity is demonstrated by using corroboration.
5.4.2.3 Reaching corroboration after disaffiliation

Yu et al. (2019) demonstrated that in couples’ conversations in Mandarin, couples would often disaffiliate but then resolve the disaffiliation. Sometimes disaffiliation occurs in the forum. In the following extract, the students are discussing whether they get the ‘grace period’\textsuperscript{56} or not to submit their EMA. Molly opens the thread. Rebecca replies in the affirmative, but also warns that relying on this is not an advisable strategy. Eva then comes in and opens the trouble, by claiming that there is no grace period for EMAs, which leads Rhona to upgrade and construct panic (see section 4.9). We can see that disaffiliation is being done here between Eva and Rhona.

\textsuperscript{56} The grace period is an additional 12-hour period students get to submit assessments, in case of computer errors.
Eva claims there is ‘no grace period whatsoever’ but Rhona’s panic emoji and questions position her as disagreeing with Eva. This is clearly an emotive issue, as the extra 12 hours would be something that many students would be relying on. Eva’s ‘x’ to mitigate stance, suggests she knows that what she is saying could be controversial. Rhona upgrades the panic, asking for evidence with an interrobang and a panicked emoji. Eva replies to Rhona definitively, claiming that a tutor told her this and this is a standard rule for EMAs. Again, we see the ‘x’ to mitigate against possible repercussions. Sandy aligns with Rhona and backs up her assessment with the ‘guidance’ and provides a link to it. She asserts that you ‘100% get the 12-hour grace period’. Providing evidence in the form of module materials makes disagreement with this very difficult. In her next post, Sandy repeats that she has
looked at the guidance, and again uses the ‘x’ to show she is sure that she is correct. The ‘this is really confusing’ saves Eva’s face – Eva is not constructed as wrong, but the information as confusing.

Extract 32

**Sandy** Hi I’ve just checked the assessment guidance. You 100% get the 12 hour grace period.

Like · Reply · 1 ·

**Sandy** This is really confusing. Because I’ve looked at the assessment guidance for the module and it says there is a grace period of 12 hours. X

Like · Reply

**Rhona** I’ve asked on the forum for confirmation x

Like · Reply ·

**Sandy** It also says on the assessment guidance that you can submit upto 24 hours after the grace period (midnight on Wednesday evening) and it will still be marked with a 10% penalty or down to a bare pass. X

Like · Reply ·

This argument leads to Rhona taking proactive action and asking on the official forum for clarification so she can establish ‘fact’. Again, she uses the ‘x’ as not to offend Sandy or Eva in her actions.

While the disagreement is being dealt with, Sandy and Rhona start to move further towards agreement and alignment. Sandy writes it is ‘naughty’ of the tutors and OU to be offering different advice, and Rhona writes ‘I feel like it has been like this all the way through’. Sandy replies with ‘I know it’s really annoying’. The formulation of the personal pronoun, verb and then the justification for why that pronoun and verb has been used aligns the students to each other. While they are waiting for the answer to the disagreement, they use this alignment to complain about being offered conflicting information.
‘Naughty’ does not sound that bad, but ‘really annoying’ upgrades Rhona’s assessment that ‘it’s been like this all the way through’. What was a little bit of a problem has become more of one, as the two delicately work together to build their alignment. The dilemma and conflict are resolved when Rhona hears back from the module forum.
Rhona convinces the others that there is a grace period, by telling them she has checked in the OU moderator-controlled forums, which is accepted by the others as a reliable source. Rhona has a delicate dilemma, however. She needs to save Eva’s face, yet provide the others with the ‘facts’. This is done with the use of short sentences, that are to the point, and a smiley face to confirm that everything is alright and to possibly avoid offence to others who are on the other side. Eva replies with posts from her tutor\(^{57}\), to blame the tutor for the information, constructing herself as not in the wrong, as not causing panic. Her tutor did.

Like Yu et al.’s (2019) research, we can see that disaffiliation is taken up and resolved with care to prevent the disagreement escalating. The students come to an agreement by using affiliative stances, which builds as they agree that tutors are at fault for confusing them and they are innocent victims of a disorganised academic system.

To recap, this section has demonstrated how corroboration is done in the forum by using metaphors, like ‘all in the same boat’. An example of disaffiliation being worked through to affiliation was also shown. Morrow’s (2006) research into depression forums also showed this use of ‘all in the same boat’, so this appears to be a common idiom to use to support people in online forums, and it is not only used when situations are related to health.

5.4.3 The Encourager

It probably comes as no surprise in a support forum that being an encourager is a common position taken up to offer support. Several idioms and phrases were identified in the forum, as being important in offering support. The use of the pronoun ‘you’ was drawn on frequently to bolster confidence and explain that the person being referred to could do well, resulting in further building a

\(^{57}\) Redacted information: see appendix 5.
sense of relationship and intimacy. Typical formulations were: ‘you'll ace it’, ‘you can do this’, ‘all you need is a pass’, ‘a pass is a pass’ and ‘well done’.

5.4.3.1 ‘You’ll ace it’

One idiom that was used to offer encouragement was ‘you’ll ace it’. Drew and Holt (1998) demonstrated that idiom was often used in praise sequences. In the following extract, the initial poster is not asking for support, she is simply narratively reporting, but she gains support in the form of encouragement and praise anyway. This pattern of gaining support but not asking for it is reminiscent of Paulus and Varga’s (2015) work into grief forums. In this extract, Helen constructs herself as a good student who has had positive feedback for TMAxx\textsuperscript{58} and was disappointed it was not graded.

Extract 35

![Image of a forum post where Helen expresses her disappointment at not receiving feedback on her TMA and receives encouragement and support from others.](image-url)

\textsuperscript{58} TMA number redacted: see appendix 5.
In the second turn, Rhona draws on the encourager identity and supports Helen by drawing on the point that the next TMA is pretty similar, so she should do well. It is here she uses the idiom ‘you'll ace it’. Helen, not everyone, but Helen in particular will be top of the pack (the ace). Helen’s offer of thanks, the big smiley emoji and the ‘x’, as well as the ‘fingers crossed’ demonstrates acceptance of the support. We then see Peter doing consensus, and aligning with Helen, constructing himself as also ‘a good student’ who would have liked there to have been a mark. So, like Drew and Holt (1998) idiom is being used to praise Helen and it is apparent that support is offered even if not asked for, like the grief advice given in Paulus and Varga’s (2015) research.

5.4.3.2 ‘You can do this... Almost done... Hang in there and keep going’

The use of the pronoun ‘you’, when encouraging, was another way to do support in the forum. The use of ‘you’ formulations to encourage people was also apparent in support forums into depression (Morrow, 2006). Also, ‘keep going’, which positions studying as a metaphorical journey, appeared 14 times in the data set. An example of both of these can be seen below in the post by Penny, where this time, the encourager is responding to a negative, rather than positive position. In the initial post, Sadie constructs herself as desperate (see section 4.6) by asking if ‘anyone’ can give her ‘any’ support to complete her TMA. The repetition builds the request for help with motivation.
The support comes in the second turn. Penny constructs herself as a helpful, kind peer by making substantial use of the pronoun ‘you’ (she repeats ‘you’ or derivatives of it 5 times) – putting emphasis on Sadie being able to do it — not Penny, or any of the others — but Sadie. She continues by drawing on ‘factual information’ — Sadie has ‘gotten this far’, so there is evidence she can do it. The repetition of ‘almost done’ works to further persuade Sadie of her ability. Sadie does not reply so once again we do not know if Penny’s support has been accepted, or even received. Like Morrow’s (2006) research into depression, a similar formulation is found in this forum with the use of pronouns, building an intimate community of support.

5.4.3.3 ‘All you need is 40%’

The posters also use repeated mantras to offer encouragement. Like ‘keep going’ in the previous post, other mantras appeared such as ‘a pass is a pass’, and ‘all you need is 40%’. An example of

59 The module result does not count towards the final degree mark, so it does not matter which score students get in terms of degree classification.
‘all you need is 40%’ can be seen below. Again, we can see that this is a response to a negative initial position, where Celia draws on the struggling identity.

Extract 37

In both Wiggins et al.’s (2016) research into suicide forums and Paulus and Varga’s (2015) research into grief support forums, support was also offered through words of encouragement. For example, in response to suicidal feelings, phrases such as ‘hang in there’ and ‘it will get better’ (Wiggins et al., 2016, p.1245) were common. Like those in suicide and grief forums, Celia adopts the position of desperate here (see section 4.7). She uses the metaphor ‘chucking’, which makes us think of throwing something away (like the towel metaphor seen in section 4.7) which works to convince others she has had enough. She claims she has words but does not feel she is answering the question. Her struggling identity and panic are further emphasised through the sentence structure and the lack of punctuation. Whether this is intentional or not is not the issue — it is the impact that matters.

To offer encouragement, both Julie and Verity draw on the repeated mantras of ‘all you need is 40%’ and ‘keep going’ to convince Celia that she can do this. The use of the ‘x’ builds their identity as friendly, supportive peers. Verity repeats much of Julie’s post, aligning with her and again, drawing on the metaphor of a journey, which works to further convince Celia that she can do it. The use of ‘just’ works to downgrade the stress, along with the phrase ‘have a cuppa’. There is no
response from Celia so again we do not know how the original poster orients to the other posts. It is clear that support phrases which are used in mental health forums are also adopted in this one.

5.4.3.4 ‘A pass is a pass’

Similarly, the extract below shows how the repeated mantra ‘a pass is a pass’ can be used to offer encouragement. In the following extract, Helen reports her TMA mark and that it was not (perhaps) as good as she was hoping for.

Extract 38

Helen
Finally got my result back.. not great score but I passed..

Mine dropped 8 points so not too bad I guess.. 2 tmas and an ema in the same month definitely took its toll.. will be upping my game for number

Rhona
A pass is a pass at level 1 😊 Well done 😊

Helen
Thank you 😊

Rhona 😊

Rhona
No problem - just surviving the month you have had sounds like a bloody achievement to me!

Helen is positioned as an average student. There is possibly some blaming going on, with ‘finally’, that she had to wait so long for her TMA, but she constructs herself as relieved she passed.
Several responses (which cannot be used for ethical reasons) congratulate Helen and remind her that ‘a pass is a pass’. Helen further accounts for her mark in the following extract and again, receives ‘a pass is a pass’ as support and encouragement from Rhona. The conversation between Rhona and Helen continues, as Helen justifies her results by blaming her workload. She corroborates with previous posts, that her marks had ‘dropped’ from other modules, positioning the students as collectively hard-done-to. Her performance is justified and she is constructed as a better student than her results suggest by explaining she had to do two TMAs and an EMA in the same month. The idiom ‘upping my game’ further convinces others that she is worth more than this mark and will perform better in TMA03. The ‘x’ does friendliness and avoids accusations of being a student who assumes they are better than others. To encourage, Rhona reiterates that ‘a pass is a pass’ convincing Helen that that this, in itself, is something to celebrate. The two smiley emoji and a ‘well done’ construct Rhona as supportive and Helen as a capable student. Helen thanks Rhona, who offers further praise and encouragement by referring to the previous post – that Helen has had a hard month with all her assignments.

We can see that by using mantras and recurrent phrases students offer support and encouragement to their fellow students, just like the encouragement offered in other support forums, such as Wiggins et al. (2016) and Morrow (2006). It would appear that even though the topics are different, the processes and ways people communicate are similar. A final recurrent phrase used to offer support is ‘well done’, which is seen in the above post, and a further two examples are given below.

5.4.3.5  Well done

Students often report doing very well in their studies, but must manage the implications of this (i.e., not boasting, but reporting). In the forum, success stories attract support and encouragement. Support is not necessarily overt. Students do report when they have done well, but they balance this with a mitigator, which works to position them as ordinary students and not exceptional. Students do not show off in this forum and are much more likely to construct themselves as ‘lucky’ when they get a good mark rather than ‘intelligent’. This is reminiscent of Benwell and Stokoe’s (2002) research into students minimising their academic knowledge in tutorials. ‘Well done’ often follows these types of posts and is used to praise and encourage students. ‘Well done’ appeared 31 times in the data set and often at the end of threads. Well done was also used when students handed in their work on time. In the three following extracts the students are doing relief and celebration at either having
handed in assignments or having received good results. The following extract shows ‘well done’
being used at the end of a sequence to praise. Here Ellie begins by doing relief – she has submitted
her TMA xx\(^60\) and only has the EMA to go.

Extract 39

Ellie

Tma is gone!!! Ema next!!

I’m glad it’s gone, just kept changing bits here and there, drives me bonkers because I keep thinking no leave it in, no take it out etc etc, in the end I just thought send it, move on, no more flaffing!!

Demi

What word counts did you all get for TMA? I’m thinking stuff it and just submitting over the allowed. Sick of looking at it now x

Lik

Ellie

Intro I got 724, conclusion 749. Your allowed 10% over anyway aren’t you? X

Like

Demi

I’ve got 760 and 808 and it’s going at that. Your right about the 10%, although my Lecturer still likes to pick you up on it. Past a point of worrying now x

Like

Ellie

Sometimes you just need to be rid of it haha!

Like

Verity

Well done guys, best of luck x x

Like

The well done comes at the end of the post by Verity, who praises the group and draws on the
corroborative idea of them ‘all in it together’, or the implicit metaphor of ‘all in the same boat’. She

\(^{60}\) Redacted: see appendix 5.
writes ‘well done guys’. The colloquial use of ‘guys’ suggests everyone is at the same level and a group. She also writes ‘best of luck’ which enhances the supportive message, as well as the two kisses at the end.

As explained earlier, to manage good results, students would draw on minimisation. In the following extract, we can see Rebecca doing just that. Again, praise is apparent and again the ‘well done’ acts as a closing, coming in the final post.

Extract 40

Rebecca

Would it be wrong to ask my tutor if she was either on drugs or drunk when she marked my assignment?!

12 likes, 7 seen by 88 comments

Rhona

That good? Or that bad?

Like · Reply ·

Rebecca

Good! I wasn't going to hand it in because I just didn't get it and got a far better mark than ever!

Like · Reply · 6

Rebecca

Thanks xx

Like · Reply ·

Sophie

Haha. I thought that about some of my results too lol. Well done 😊 x

Rebecca’s humour minimises the extent of her achievement, which works to convince others she is ‘one of them’, yet none-the-less has done well. The ‘shock’ is done through a question, suggesting that her tutor’s marking must be wrong — she claims she is not that good a student. She gets 12 likes, which is a lot in comparison to some other posts. Rhona asks Rebecca to clarify whether her mark was good or bad, which leads to Rebecca further emphasising her shock by claiming ‘she was
not even going to hand it in’ because she did not think it was any good. In this way, she mitigates against being accused of being too good. Sophie uses laughter (haha and lol) which works to corroborate. The ‘haha’ shows she shares the understanding of the joke and ‘lol’ positions her as ‘in the same boat’ as Rebecca. A group identity of ‘lucky students’ is drawn on and shows that humility is done in this forum as part of their community rules. Like previous research (such as Paulus and Lester, 2016), these students do not boast about their achievements, but minimise and resist being overly academic. The ‘well done’ closes and brings the group together.

‘Well done’ can be used to praise, as above, but it can also be used as a softener before asking for information. In the following extract, Cindy draws on ‘well done’, which congratulates and encourages Sally. However, the ‘well done’ is also a precursor to open a request for support, which is different than using it as a closing phrase.

Extract 41

The use of ‘61 constructs Sally as a very good student but, like the previous extract, it is done humorously, which works to avoid accusations of being too good. In both this extract and the

61 TMA result removed: see appendix 5.
previous ones, students use several exclamation marks when reporting good news. This shows excitement. Sally also claims she is surprised, which manages the exceptionally high mark for those who may not have done as well. The emoji constructs Sally as embarrassed, a ‘swot’ and celebrating (opening the champagne). She receives 23 ‘likes’ for this post, demonstrating support. The ‘well done’ comes in the second turn. This could be praise but is also used as a softener before Cindy asks for help to find her results. This suggests that being positioned as having a high mark and finished, also works as constructing a ‘knowledgeable’ identity and invites others to ask for solutions.

From the above it is clear that the use of ‘well done’ is a popular phrase used to praise each other, helping to build a community of support. It is also clear that humour plays a part in the forum, such as was seen in extract 40, where Rebecca jokes that her tutor must have been intoxicated in order to mark her assignment so highly. The following section delves into humour in more depth.

5.4.4 The Fantasisers and Jokers

In the previous section, it was demonstrated that joking and fantasising can build support. Beach and Prickett (2017) showed that stress can result in humour in conversational medical settings. Humour was used frequently in the forum and appeared particularly around periods of stress. In one of the longest threads in the data with fast interaction, stress is relieved by building on a fantasy. The thread starts with a typical ‘cry for help’ and again consists of many corroborative replies, before the fantasy construction begins. Before we look at the group’s fantasy, it is important to provide some background.
The thread begins with Rhona’s request for support, which constructs her as desperate (see section 4.7), but the seeds of humour are already there with the use of the metaphor ‘breaking my soul’ to convince others she is really crumbling. Rhona’s discourse of humour dramatizes her stress. The repetition of ‘ands’ construct Rhona as in chaos, as does the list of things she has been doing to try and complete her EMA. The four ‘floods of tears’ emoji add to the psychological state of desperation, emphasising that she has been ‘driven to tears’, but this is funny as the wailing emoji is plentiful and over-the-top, as is the junk food comment and metaphor of explosion. The final question opens the thread up for others to corroborate.

Holt (2011) argues that in spoken interaction, people would laugh at dramatic figurative language and that the next turns would often be upgrades. We can see this in this thread, as the corroboration is built in the following ways. Murray claims he hates the EMA, which is an upgrade as Rhona has not actually said she hates it, although a reader may assume this to be the case. The ‘oh yes’ constructs
him as also struggling. Sandy agrees and corroborates with Murray, then upgrades even further, by claiming she cannot even write it. Penny upgrades again, referring to an earlier post where she told xxxx62 she had had enough and was leaving the module. Sandy returns, convincing others that she has an even greater struggle — she cannot find the ‘flow’ she usually does. Rebecca upgrades — she is ‘past’ tears — unlike being driven to tears, she has none left. Miranda positions herself as ‘even worse off’ than the rest — she has not done anything — just looked at the question. Support is offered by again drawing on the (implicit) metaphor, that they are ‘all in the same boat’, although some boats are leakier than others. The posters then move into the fantasy.

62 Redacted: see appendix 5
Support is being done here through humour, achieved through the repetition of escape, fantasy and a flight metaphor. The idea of a fantasy island is quickly picked up by Rebecca who upgrades and increases the fantasy, by playing along and asking Rhona if they can just drink cocktails on this island. The implicit metaphor of ‘all being in the same boat’ is taken further. Not only are they all in the same boat, but they have metaphorically taken the boat (flown) to an island. Penny also picks up the fantasy, joining ‘in’ literally, by repeating ‘in’ and ‘oh man’. These work to enhance the image of escape and momentum is built. Rhona continues and the list convinces others that this fantasy island would be perfect — full of cocktails, chocolate, cheese and wine. And, as a discursive addition, she explains they would not be allowed to talk about the module, or they would be removed from the island. Doing escape is increased by Rebecca as she upgrades the fantasy further and claims she has booked her flight, and then in a further thread announces she will be travelling first class – of course. This constructs the group as ‘so hard done to’ that they deserve to all travel first class.
She continues the fantasy by claiming she is going to find her passport. Rebecca then puts imaginary waiters on the island and Rhona and she construct a joint new ‘rule’ — that the chefs must be naked. The humour here is building and it is interesting from a sexual stereotyping perspective. It seems to be acceptable for women to do this and then Murray introjects. He wants a naked waitress.
Beryl draws on psychological repertoire to continue the fantasy. The waiters are not allowed to leave or say if they want to take part or not (in other words, give informed consent). xxxx\textsuperscript{63} She has a wink at the end, to normalise her academic knowledge and let the others ‘get’ the joke. The deleted posts (deleted for ethical reasons) perhaps take the humour a bit far and this could be why the thread stops — or simply that the humour has run its course and the holiday is over. A few hours later Celia posts with ‘loads of support’, constructing herself as appreciative of her fellow students. The ‘cried and cried’ could refer to the thread, or the EMA.

\textsuperscript{63} Text removed: see appendix 5.
Like Beach and Prickett’s (2017) research, drawing on stress has resulted in discursive humour. Like Holt’s (2011) research, the humour in these posts work by upgrading. It is clear that similar patterns exist between written and spoken use of humour when doing support work.

5.4.5 The Sympathiser

In Morrow’s (2006) research solidarity was demonstrated by using sympathy. The students also sympathise with each other’s struggles. This section gives an example of sympathising for support, where drawing on factual information is used to advise the poster. In this thread, Rhona is offering sympathy to Celia, who has asked for help with her EMA. Celia may be asking for too much help, so delicate handling is required from Rhona and Sandy. The sympathy comes from Rhona, towards the end of the thread.

Extract 46

Celia

help me i have lost the plot. part 2 ema discuss the value of quantitative, but the chaps seem to go on about the limitations of this research. so how is anyone supposed to draw on the value?? does anyone actually understand the point?

Celia

chap is ok but seems the other two are more supportive of qualitative

Sandy

That’s good. Two sides to your argument xx

Sandy

That’s what they want. Discuss the value. Where it’s of value and when it’s not of value. Then make a conclusion based on that.. I think anyway lol xx
Celia

but i thought we were supposed to take a position and stick to it. i wanted to be for quantitative as in its value but first two chaps manily limitations of it?

Like   More

Sandy

Sorry I haven't actually looked at the guidance or anything. I just assumed they would want both sides of the argument x

Like   More

Celia

dont know how you use evidence of limitations when your to show the value of it, am i missing the point?

Like   More

Rhona

Try and slow down Celia we will get loads of tutor advice at the tutorials next week x

5 yrs   Like   More

Celia

it takes me weeks to write an essay thats why i go ahead. is a massive stopper to meeting deadlines. have emailed tutor x
Sandy

Just looked at the guidance it's definitely both sides of an argument. X conclusion is where you take your position. X

Celia

thanks. so must reemeber the value of something includes the limitations of it. nightmare because if you value something you tend to look at positives, i have to get it that limitations can also show a value or not. the wording is a nightmare for a maybe look at it by what are the strengths and limitations of quantitative evidence or would that be wrong?

Rhona

Have you called your tutor Celia? It might help as we are obviously limited in what we can say x
Celia

so both points of view then. because the one wanted you to take a position in the argument, im confused about these ways to structure

Like More

Celia

ok i will let you know. tbh this way is better. the guide says to follow tma 1 too and that argument was that you had to take a position for or against even though you put two views. this is made harder if the majority of evidence in chaps 1 and 6 is against when i want to write for it. but can do both for strengths and limitations that would be great. just cant show value of it if its taking side of qualitative instead as it goes against the question.
This thread involves Sandy and Rhona clarifying a TMA task for Celia. Both Sandy and Rhona’s discourse has to manage the delicate balance between offering too much help and not giving enough support, but as Celia presses them, trouble has to be prevented. Sandy delicately manages this in different ways. She draws on the factual information of ‘the guidance’. She does sympathy by the use of the ‘x’ more than once. Celia, however, continues to position herself as confused (see section 4.4.1) and desperate (see section 4.7), which works as a request to gain more help. She thanks Sandy for her help so far in turn 11 but continues by asking if a certain way of approaching the question would be wrong. She draws on the identity of xxxx64 to account for why she needs to ask questions,

64 Redacted: see appendix 5.
although, of course, critical thinking is not only difficult for xxx\textsuperscript{65} students. Rhona, who has previously suggested that Celia waits until her tutorial for help and offered sympathy, then comes in and works to alleviate Celia’s tension by being sympathetic, but reasonable. She convinces Celia asking her tutor is her best option by drawing on the shared understanding that giving too much information would be against the rules. This use of the advice-relevant interrogative (Butler, \textit{et al.}, 2010) offers a suggestion for Celia to take up an offer of help. Celia continues to position herself as confused, still asking for help. Rhona continues sympathetically, giving Celia the answer in a roundabout way, drawing on factual information and explaining that what she said is in the student notes. Celia continues to draw on the xxx\textsuperscript{66} identity to account for why this is not her fault — others find this type of thing much easier than her because they are not xxx\textsuperscript{67}. The ‘lol’ mitigates potential face threat, so she is not accused of being unfair to the person who is offering her sympathy and support. The use of ‘honey’ and the metaphor ‘bang on track’, as well as the smiley emoji in the last line, does further sympathy for Celia. Previous research (Pudlinski, 2005) has shown that closing sympathetic responses can be done with idiom, and here the use of ‘bang on track’, as an idiom and metaphor occurs. Again, Pudlinski’s research was into talk rather than written discourse, so it is interesting that the same strategy is apparent. Also, often ‘I know’ is used in empathy rather than sympathy (Pudlinski, 2005; Wiggins \textit{et al.} 2016), but here, ‘I know’ is not being used empathetically in the same way as in the previous research into support forums, because Rhona does not claim to be xxx\textsuperscript{68}. Instead, Rhona is using ‘I know’ to sympathise that she knows that Celia has this problem.

5.5 Deviant case- The ‘Rule Stickler’- being cautious about offering help

However, support and help are not always offered. As explained earlier, there are certain ‘rules’ in the forum, like you cannot directly tell someone what to include in an assignment. In extract 47, again initiated by Celia, she positions herself as a hard-working, but anxious and stressed student (see section 4.6) who wants to discuss certain aspects of her studies, so she can clarify understanding, but is unsure where the boundaries are. Her discourse is an attempt to convince others that she is justified in being confused and annoyed, by contrasting what she sees as the OU ‘rules’ with other more traditional university ‘rules’. She builds on this frustrated identity (see section 4.6) by asking who can advise students. What follows is a response where the poster is constructed

\textsuperscript{65} Redacted: see appendix 5.
\textsuperscript{66} Redacted: see appendix 5.
\textsuperscript{67} Redacted: see appendix 5.
\textsuperscript{68} Redacted: see appendix 5.
as a ‘rule stickler’ who positions herself as concerned over the amount of help some people ask for in the forum.

Extract 47

getting annoyed at not being able to ask certain questions for breaching rules, if i was at a university other than open, i would be able to discuss what i cant see, that others can and students can discuss freely between them can you understand this, yes its such and such, but with O.U. no such discussions. who do you go to? cant ask tutor or might be directing. A bit unsure what i can ask and what is a breach to asking as you are supposed to work it out and it be part of what you have learnt and shown?????????? confused

Miranda replies by constructing the OU ‘rules’ as necessary and important. She explains that although they should not discuss answers to assignments, the real problem is using Facebook to do it, as answers will be written down in a public space, so people could be accused of cheating. She accounts for this position by convincing Celia that the rule is for their protection and helps stop plagiarism. Miranda accounts for her position as a ‘rule following’ student, by explaining that people should not get credit for what they do not understand. To manage her stance and avoid being accused of being harsh, Miranda uses two xx’s to show friendliness, as well as the minimiser that that is ‘just’ her point of view.
The dilemma of what is and is not appropriate help to ask for in the forum is managed through the justification of ‘sticking to the rules’. Interestingly, though, another student completely ignores this and asks Celia what she needs help with. In the following extract we can see Clara is doing ‘I’m a friendlier and more helpful student than Miranda’.

Extract 48

Celia replies to Clara saying thanks, but the next section of her post appears to be more directed at Miranda, indicating discursive trouble. Celia further accounts for asking for help by explaining she needs help in understanding things and that discussion aids her. She argues this is not the same as getting help with actual essay writing. Miranda continues to defend her position later in the thread.

Extract 49

Miranda further accounts for sticking to the rules but manages her stance by blaming herself for being overly cautious. The ‘xx’, partly defuses the tension and explains why she positioned herself in this way. She manages her side in the dilemma by being reasonable and drawing on her experience of the ‘risk’ factor of collaboration on forums. She supports the OU in this rather than the other students in the discussion, which suggests shared understanding of the ‘rules’ in the forum may differ.
5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that students offer help, advice and support in different ways: as the helper, the advisor, the reporter, the corroborator, the encourager, fantasists and jokers and as the sympathiser. When offering help, hedging information is sometimes important, but not always. Drawing on second stories and minimising information protects against accusations of providing inaccurate information. Using second stories was evident in advice offering, along with asking questions and being vague. When offering support, reporting, corroboration, encouraging each other, drawing on humour and sympathising were frequent. All this works to build and preserve this supportive, shared community in a virtual space, which the students work hard to maintain.

There are many similarities in help, advice and support offering in this forum and research done in the past. One area that stands out is the use of second stories, also apparent in depression forums (Morrow, 2006), suicide forums (Wiggins et al., 2016) and those into bariatric surgery (Cranwell and Seymour Smith, 2012). It is also clear that using second stories is done in both tutor-led (Paulus and Lester, 2013) and student-led forums to offer support. Second stories appeared in help, advice and support offering in this forum.

Paulus and Lester (2013) found that being vague could work to manage offering academic information in case it was wrong. This was also found when students offered help here. Similarly, Benwell and Stokoe (2002) demonstrated being vague was a practice used to avoid accusations of knowing too much. It is possible from this research, that both in formal academic settings and spoken and written discourse, students follow the same patterns. Another practice that was found in advice offering, rather than help or support was asking advice-implementing interrogatives, to establish if students have previously tried certain things to help them in their problem which also appeared in Butler et al.’s (2010) research into advice giving in child-support helplines. So, when offering advice, drawing on questions is done in this online setting too.

In terms of support, idiom was a frequent technique. This finding was also apparent in Versteeg et al.’s (2018) research into medication and aspartame where using idiom would rationalise behaviour. In this forum, the common idiom was ‘in the same boat’, which positioned all the students as having the same experience. Idiom had the function of praising, which was a similar finding to Drew and Holt (1998). Repeated mantras, such as ‘keep going’ and ‘a pass is a pass’ were also used to support others. This is reminiscent of the findings in Wiggins et al.’s (2016) research, where phrases such as
‘hang in there’ were used to support those who built suicidal identities. Idioms also built sympathy, like in Pudlinski’s (2005) research into troubles-telling in a peer-to-peer telephone support line.

It was interesting that in the forum students would construct the rules to be followed and usually obey them. This led to some tensions, but also some really funny situations, where humour further built the supportive community. Identities that were accepted were supportive, pleased with achievement, but not boastful, friendly and kind. The humour done under the stress of the EMA is reminiscent of how patients deal with cancer appointments (Beach and Prickett, 2017), suggesting that humour can help when dealing with stress.

The analysis so far has shown us how students ask for help, support and advice and then how they offer help, support and advice. The next chapter will examine how students discursively manage complaints.
6 Analysis 3: How do distance-learners open, build and close complaints in an informal Facebook forum?

The previous chapters have examined how students construct different identities to open up threads to ask for help, advice and support and how help, advice and support is offered throughout the threads. This chapter examines how these students raise and discuss complaints. After asking for help, advice and support and offering help, advice and support, complaining was the next most common discursive activity in the forum. This is a very important aspect of the forum to uncover because students, as this chapter will show, by complaining, build subject positions of the disempowered student, and create communities where this is common.

Research into complaining on social media forums from a discursive psychological approach is limited, although Roper (2017) did investigate complaining around step parenting from a synthetic narrative-discursive and feminist perspective. Similarly, research into written complaints is limited, although Mccreadie et al. (2018) did examine written complaints into healthcare. My research is also looking at written complaints into a publicly funded body, although this time it is education. There has been nothing found in the literature search on complaint building of students in social media, specifically Facebook. This chapter will address that gap.

This research takes a DP approach with a focus on turn-taking and accountability. The chapter draws on previous complaint literature and compares and contrasts the previous research with examples of the complaint sequences done in the forum. The key papers drawn on are Drew and Holt’s (1988) work into complaints and how they are built in mundane phone conversations; Edwards’ (2005) work into ‘moaning and whinging’; Stokoe and Hepburn’s (2005) work into noise formulations in neighbourhood complaints and in calls to an NSPCC helpline and Mccreadie et al.’s (2018) work into patients’ complaints in letters. The chapter also draws on ECFs (Pomerantz, 1986) when complaining. While there may be other research into complaints and troubles, these papers were chosen because they are relevant to complaint building from a CA/DP approach.

The chapter begins with definitions of complaints. It will then, via the use of 15 threads from the dataset, look at some of the strategies used by the students to open, build and close complaints. These threads were selected because they were identified as examples of complaints in the dataset which illuminated the strategies used by the students to open, build and close complaints. This

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69 See the literature review for a more detailed discussion of relevant complaint literature.
chapter will look at what discursive actions are drawn on when these students undertake the act of complaining, or ‘moaning’ and ‘whinging’ as in Edwards’ (2005) research. Previous research suggests that complaints need to be worked up or made convincing (Pomerantz, 1986) so much of the next section of the chapter will look at how these complaints are built up and made serious, as opposed to being unimportant. Thirdly, it will conclude by exploring the possibility that by indulging in the act of complaining, ‘moaning’ and ‘whinging’ (Edwards, 2005), the students make available positions of disempowerment. Finally, the analysis also considers some ways complaint sequences end.

As a guide, complaint instances were classified as follows:

Table 3- instances of complaint actions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>All openings to complaints (either at the start or within a thread)</strong></td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No build up announcements</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-complaint announcements</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed announcement</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All establishing/ building</strong></td>
<td>566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment and corroboration</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphatics</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive detail</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECF</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All closing</strong></td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing with punctuation/laughter/ emoji</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing with ‘me too’</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.1 Complaint definitions

For the purposes of this chapter, a complaint can be defined as an act that expresses a lack of satisfaction with something. In terms of Brown and Levinson (1987), a complaint is a ‘face-threatening act’, or something that another needs to re-act against. A complaint is an evaluation of someone or something that is negatively positioned in relation to the person doing the complaining. Complaints are often about people who are not there (Robles and Parks, 2019). Edwards (2005, p.7) notes that other words, such as ‘criticism’ and ‘accusation’ are often used instead of the word ‘complaint’.

6.2 An example of a complaint sequence

Fifteen threads are drawn on in this chapter, and these are numbered 1-15, so thread 1 in this chapter is not the same as extract 1 in chapter 4, for example. The threads are returned to throughout the chapter, so all extracts from Thread 1 are named as Thread 1. Thread 1 (see below) is shown to illustrate some of the analytic points that will be covered in this chapter. When excerpts from the thread are first introduced, only quotes relevant to the analytic point being presented will be discussed. Other quotes will be examined in the context of further analysis, later in the chapter. Having one thread as an example should alleviate the concerns that analysis has been missed. This is a particularly long thread so it was chosen so that several analytic points could be signalled to the reader.
Example of a complaint thread: Thread 1

Rebecca

Without wanting to sound like I'm just throwing a strop, I'm seriously considering withdrawing from this course and changing my degree. My results have dropped so much, just had my tma back and I'm absolutely gutted. I worked really hard and I've dropped 27 marks from my average on my other module to this. Really can't see the point in working my backside off if I'm not getting the grades. I feel like I might as well do a different degree that I stand a chance of passing. Off to cry into my tea now!

Celia

Me too will inbox you seen as we have same tutor

Like

Rhona

You are more than half way through the reading 😊 is the feedback stuff that is easy to work on to increase the grades for the next TMA's? Don't give up now 😊 You can do this 😊

1

Celia

I have dropped 27 marks too from other module

Like

Rhona

Remember that this is just one module of the degree and the grades for this module are just a pass or fail 😊

Rebecca

I know, I'm just reconsidering if this is the right course now. I do have a problem so know it'll only get harder.

The mark was hard enough to read, saving the feedback to ruin my day with tomorrow 😞 ... See more

Maybe I'm just sulking, the toys have been well and truly thrown out of the pram for this evening though!

Rhona

Well I totally believe in you. It is hard but I promise it is manageable 😚❤️

Like

Openings - preannouncement
Establishing complaints:
Descriptive detailing
Implied ECF to convince others of the seriousness of her situation.
Establishing complaints:
corroborate
Use of idiom to convince others of complaint.
Rhona: Have a glass of vino! 😊
- Like: 1

Rebecca: Not! I don't touch a drop, I know one glass would be ok but the mood I'm in it'd be the bottle! Good job there's no chocolate in the house 😁
- Like: 1

Rebecca: I really do need to read the feedback though, someone else in my tutor group had the feedback that she should have written more in the introduction, made more points, and written more about the ones she had made. Erm, what about that thing called a word count?!
- Like: 1

Deleted post

Rebecca: My last module really boosted my confidence and made me feel like I actually had a brain, now not so much! I'm thinking of changing to the combined social science degree, I did so much better in that module!

We may need higher word counts but surely considering we don't we shouldn't be being penalised for not writing enough! I could have understood it if she'd been told that she needed to make fewer points but wrote more about each, but not more of everything, that's impossible! X
- Like: 2

Rhona: Oops, I comment 😁

Rebecca: Yeah, don't rub it in! 😅)
- Like

Rhona: Chocolate as a substitute??
- Like: 1

Rhona: I'm in bed using duvet as my fix!
- Like: 1

Deleted post

Using another’s experience to build complaint and convince the forum of her entitlement to complain.

Use of contrast to convince others of entitlement to complain – good/bad marks

Use of humour to displace the focus on the complaint and position Rebecca as reasonable – it is the object of the complaint that is the problem and not Rebecca.
Rebecca
My plan had been to finish my online tutorial and try and finish the week I’m on, I’ve spent the night moaning and being very unmotivated to do anything!

No chocolate in the house luckily, I need!

Rebecca
I wouldn’t want to defer, I’ll either complete it or change and do a different module. I’ll sleep on it and speak to student support if I’m still thinking of changing, I’m not sure if this far in I can switch without having to pay anyway. If I can’t I’ll carry on and then do a different level 1 in October if I’m allowed.

Like

Rhona
But I’m pretending I don’t know that!

Like

Rebecca
How about the inch thick Nutella on top?!

Like

Rhona
I’m going to say that’s fine because I do it

Like

Rebecca
Well they advertise it as containing a hazelnut and however much milk in each spoonful, half the jar must be even better for you then!
Rhona: And nuts contain essential fatty acids. Really it’s a health food!

Rebecca: And chocolate is from a bean etc 😊

Rebecca: That’s not all that surprising now is it?

Celia: same exactly was said to me abt more intro etc etc and i thought about what she said i should have added and word count same comments can’t believe it.

Rebecca: It’ll be interesting when I read mine!

Celia: it will be to see if comments vary from ours

Deleted post

Rhona: Are you all from the same tutor?

Rebecca: Me and Celia are, plus the person who had the feedback I was talking about. Not sure abt but it would be a huge coincidence of we were!

Deleted post

Rebecca: I was definitely planning on it course but I’m having serious doubts now. Even if I decide to stick with this pathway I’m not sure I’ll be able to cope with much I made the decision when I was feeling good about my capabilities based on my lat module! X
Rebecca: No, whereabouts are you?
Rhona: Ahh I thought it might be a very hard marker for all of you 😊
Rebecca: No, but I know of others with tutors that dropped a lot of marks as well so maybe it’s just a harder course than we’re used to!
Celia: unsure? so people getting 89s would get 100 plus in other course? seemed alot got high on tma01, so would it not work both ways or am i being thick?? maybe i am lol
Rhona: I feel like they expect a very high standard. I lost two marks on part two for using the word ‘doesn’t’ instead of ‘does not’ once by accident which is almost 8% of that part and lost almost 15% of part one when the only negative comment was that I should have expanded the last sentence of my conclusion more...
Rebecca: Rhona were you on an online tutorial last night?
Rhona: Rebe
Rebecca: microphone??
Rhona: Yes 😊😊😊
Rhona: Poor tutor 😞
Rebecca: Small world! Yes, must have been a nightmare for her.

Delicate work here as Rhona works to avoid being accused of blaming the students. If they are not all a victim of a hard marker then they could have done less well because they are less able.

The module, rather than the tutors are blamed. Whoever is at fault, it is not the students.

Potential trouble as Celia contests Rebecca’s assessment.
Stacey
I 100% agree! I had low marks for both my TMAs on this module but my either two, I'm being scored approx 30-40 marks higher consistently? Plus the comments are so finicky, I wasn't even given my marks for the third question!!

Rebecca
I called student support this morning to discuss what options I had if I decided to change degree and withdraw from this module. She said that I shouldn't be disheartened by my scores, this is a far harder module than the other one I did and they're not surprised if people's marks drop substantially. It sounds like it could be the same for you too.

The third party of the tma wasn't actually marked, we'd just lose a few if we didn't do it.

Deletion posts
Rebecca
I'm doing ___ but my first module was

Deleted post

Rebecca
It sounds really interesting so I'm hoping that that'll keep me going!

Stacey
I'm doing both

Rhona
I think it depends on you individually. I personally find but am having to really work for this mod.
In this thread there are several points of interest that could be picked up on in relation to complaints. For this chapter I group these around openings, building complaints and endings.

6.3 Opening complaints

Complaining is a discursive act of trouble (Jefferson, 1988) where the trouble is a problem that needs to be discussed, even if not necessarily solved. The trouble identified in the complaint threads here include the (lack of) the return of TMAs, marks awarded and contradictory advice offered from OU staff and materials. To justify the complaints, students need to work up and account for why these problems are important, if they want to get support from other students. Complaints are therefore delicate acts from students in discourse terms.

Edwards’ (2005) research into telephone complaints identified that complaints often begin with ‘announcements’ (where a speaker, instead of launching into a complaint straight-away, explains what their stance is towards it). However, this is not always the case in my dataset of written discourse: instead of testing the waters, students do announce their complaint straightaway. This could be because in order to connect with an audience in a forum, the need for immediacy outweighs the need to build complaints more gradually. As Roper (2107) argues, participants may come to the forum knowing it is a place where complaints are acceptable and expecting a response. It is also important to note that previous research has tended to be on one complainant to one recipient. There are many recipients in a forum, meaning there may be implications for how people construct complaints to grab an audience. There is not the same need to grab an audience if you already have their full attention (in a one-to-one conversation). It is not unusual, when reading forum posts, to scroll until something of interest catches your eye.

It is important to note that in this section, only the openings are focused on (that is the first few lines of the post). The following lines will be dealt with in section 6.4.
6.3.1 Announcements

The findings will start by looking at pre-complaint announcements (Edwards, 2012). Pre-complaint announcements are when a speaker, instead of launching into a complaint straight-away, explains what their stance is towards it. The example Edwards (2012) gives is ‘I’m broiling about something’ (Edwards, 2012, p.429) which sets up the receiver of the announcement to expect anger formulations. The use of ‘something’ builds suspense and pulls the listener in. It is interesting that in this data, which is on written, rather than verbal complaints, we also see this pattern of announcing that a complaint is coming. Several examples of pre-complaint announcements can be seen below.

In the following thread, the ‘trouble’ (Jefferson, 1988) is that student’s marks are not as high as they would like.

6.3.2 Opening complaints 1: Pre-complaint announcements (building to the complaint in one post)

Thread 1: Complaining about grades

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rebecca</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Without wanting to sound like I’m just throwing a strop, I’m seriously considering withdrawing from this course and changing my degree. My results have dropped so much, just had my tma back and I’m absolutely gutted. I worked really hard and I’ve dropped 27 marks from my average on my other module to this. Really can’t see the point in working my backside off if I’m not getting the grades. I feel like i might as well do a different degree that i stand a chance of passing. Off to cry into my tea now!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60 Seen by 97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Celia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>me too will inbox you seen as we have same tutor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Establishing complaints: |
| Descriptive detailing |

| Openings - preannouncement |

| Implied ECF to convince others of the seriousness of her situation. |

| Establishing complaints: |
| Corroboration |
Like Edwards’ (2005) example, in thread 1 the announcement is built up before it is explained. The reader is ‘signalled’ (Edwards, 2005, p.9) that a complaint is coming as Rebecca constructs herself as frustrated and that she is ‘seriously considering withdrawing from her course and changing her degree’. Rebecca disclaims her upcoming complaint with ‘without wanting to sound like I’m just’. The ‘just’ works to convince forum members she is not ‘throwing a strop’ but entitled to feel aggrieved. It also works to signal that she could reasonably be throwing a strop because she has had such a bad experience. Being angry over the low marks would be understandable in this forum. Such catastrophic construction works to position Rebecca as dealing with significant trouble before she announces the actual problem in the second sentence: she got a mark she considers to be less than what she deserves or wants. Rebecca accounts for the business of achieving a low mark by positioning herself as the victim of these poor marks, doing ‘it’s not my fault’. Dersley and Wootton (2000) also found ‘not at fault’ was one of the ways denial was done in spoken complaint sequences. The seriousness of the complaint is built and attended to, just like in Edwards’ (2005), phone research, for example, where Rob explains that there is something he is ‘disgusted about’ (Edwards, 2005, p.9) and then goes on to explain what it is.

A similar example can be seen in thread 2, where a student is complaining that she has had no mark for her TMA:

**Thread 2: complaining that there is no mark**

The OU just like to tease and torment. I was recommended trying to submit whatever i could for tma late, just in case. Have completed a special circumstances form. Anyhow, my tutor notified me he was unable to mark it. Then today i received notification it was marked and ready to collect, got slightly excited. Only to go on, see positive comments but no grade just Received Late in the box... Let down! Lol ahhh well at least i have passed the course bit, here's hoping the ema will be successful!
Again, we can see that Eva builds up her complaint before she announces it. It is not until the fifth sentence we see the trouble (Jefferson, 1988), that her TMA has not been marked. The statement ‘tease and torment’ sets up the upcoming complaint and provokes her audience into asking what she has been teased and tormented about. An unusual opening is normatively expected to be accounted for and here it can be seen that Eva does just that. She explains why: she thought she had got a mark for an assignment, only to find out she had not. She draws on the emotion state of irritation with ‘let down’ which positions her as a victim of unfair information.

We can see a similar occurrence in Thread 3. The trouble (Jefferson, 1988) in this thread is that a tutor has not given a student information she needs. Here, Hayley begins by drawing on the desperate identity (see section 4.7) before she announces her complaint in the second sentence. The audience is drawn in by using the colloquial ‘hey guys’ (constructing everyone as ‘in it together’) and the thread is opened dramatically with ‘really need(s) some help’. Here it can be seen that Hayley needs to account for why she cannot do what the tutor has asked and uses her xxxx\(^70\) as the justification.

Thread 3: Opening up by pulling in the readers

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\(^70\) Redacted: see appendix 5.
2 is particularly interesting in that the support is given via ‘likes’ rather than responses and it could be argued this is because Eva resolves her own complaint by the end of the post, unlike Rebecca’s and Hayley’s complaints. This finding builds on what has been found in complaint sequences into phone calls (Drew and Holt, 1988; Stokoe and Hepburn, 2005) and Roper's (2017) work on forums.

This section has also demonstrated how participants attend to accountability. The participants orient to the assumption that they need to explain their part in the story of their complaint (losing marks; why the OU have ‘tormented’ them and why they cannot do the work they have been asked to do).

6.3.2.1 Opening complaints 2: Delayed complaint announcements (the complaint comes after the first turn)

Thread 4: Building up suspense before complaining about marks

A different way of opening up a complaint comes from Demi, where the trouble is again around marks awarded. This time the actual complaint comes after the first turn.
Demi invites others to corroborate with her experience, but not until later in the thread. She simply asks if anyone has their marks back yet. The first turn works to delay the complaint as it could mean that Demi wants to discuss her marks, but it could also mean that she is still waiting for her marks. It is not until the 9th turn in the thread that Demi’s position is revealed: her emotional state of disappointment, is accounted for because she was ‘marked down’. It could be argued this is like hedging seen in spoken discourse where people ‘test the waters’ before they launch into a complaint as in Drew’s (1998) paper. Why some students ‘test the waters’ whereas other students outline their complaint in the first turn may be to do with the type of complaint they have. For example, it may be threatening to say what your marks are straightaway. It is interesting that the deleted turns involve students saying that they are still waiting or that they have done quite well which may again suggest that ‘testing the waters’ is important when sometimes revealing a complaint. By asking a question the participants in the forum are invited to comment which lays the groundwork before revealing a complaint.
6.3.2.2 Opening complaints 3: Announcements with no prior warning

However, in contrast to this pattern of pre-announcing or delaying a complaint, there was also a tendency for students to directly launch into a complaint with no warning. This is in contrast to Drew and Walker’s (2009) pattern, where complaints were worked up cautiously. For example, in Thread 5 we can see how Ellie does not position herself as about to complain. She just launches straight into it with ‘I really need my TMA 05 results now’ which lets the reader know straight away she wants her marks back and is complaining about the wait. The announcement is treated as a complaint by the readers, with Annie’s ‘still waiting’.

Thread 5: Complaining about waiting for marks via a direct complaint

In thread 6, Erin also opens with a direct announcement. This time the trouble is an unresponsive tutor.

Thread 6: Complaining about a tutor straight away
Straight away Erin launches into her complaint: she is having trouble with her tutor. The question of ‘is anyone else’ works as an invitation to the others to align to her stance. What is it about these forums that allow for complaining without a build-up to be acceptable? Is it because of the urgency of the complaint? There is clearly no need for ‘pleasantries’ and as the complaints do gain responses (16 in thread 5 and 9 in thread 6). One reason may be that these complaints are done towards the end of the life cycle of the forum. It may be that the forum culture is one where complaints like this are normal and expected, similar to Roper’s (2017) participants whose forum was also used as a place to complain and gain a response.

6.3.3 Summary of openings

This section has outlined how complaints begin on Facebook when students are discussing their studies. Students may narratively build to their complaint by using pre-complaint announcements in the opening turn. The first three examples demonstrate an opening turn that does not tell the reader what the complaint is until after the first sentence. The fourth example delays explication of the complaint until a later turn. The final two examples demonstrate the reveal of the complaint straight away with no build up. What is similar between these examples and Edwards’ (2005) work, is that quite often complaints begin with a pre-reveal build up. At other times the complaint is launched into straight away. One reason for the difference between these type of complaints (announcing straight away) and complaints on the phone may be that the time taken to engage with a complaint may be less generous on social media. To gain responses to a post, a post needs to be attention-grabbing as there is no confirmed audience (it is possible no-one will ever take notice or read a post unless it is attention-grabbing). Students are also not in a one-to-one situation, like in a phone call for example. They are also not in a tutorial where a tutor would moderate their discussions. The audience are students on a module whose (perhaps only) method of communication with others who have shared knowledge of their trouble is Facebook. Students need to construct their complaint so their irritation can be understood (not necessarily ‘fixed’) quickly, and their part in the complaint event accounted for. Edwards (2005) does point out that the way complaints begin may differ depending on situation and complaint receiver.
6.4 How complaints are established

The chapter will now move on to look at how complaints are established including: descriptive detailing (Drew, 1998); the use of ECFs (Pomerantz, 1986); corroboration (alignment, mirroring and repetition), emphasis and the use of contrast (Stokoe and Hepburn, 2005).

6.4.1 Establishing complaints 1: descriptive detailing

Students sometimes give lots of detail about their complaint which aligns with Mccreadie et al.’s (2018) research into healthcare complaint letters, where complainants would use description and ECFs to describe their complaint and undermine alternatives. The same was apparent in Drew’s (1998) research into telephone conversations. Let us return to thread 1 as an illustrative example.
Thread 1: Detailed complaining about grades

Rebecca

Without wanting to sound like I’m just throwing a strop, I’m seriously considering withdrawing from this course and changing my degree. My results have dropped so much, just had my tma back and I’m absolutely gutted. I worked really hard and I’ve dropped 27 marks from my average on my other module to this. Really can’t see the point in working my backside off if I’m not getting the grades. I feel like I might as well do a different degree that I stand a chance of passing. Off to cry into my tea now!

Like Comment

Celia me too will inbox you seen as we have same tutor
Like

Deleted post

Rhona You are more than halfway through the reading 😊 is the feedback stuff that is easy to work on to increase the grades for the next TMA’s? Don’t give up now 😊 You can do this 😊
Like

Celia I have dropped 27 marks too from other module
Like

Rhona I remember that this is just one module of the degree and the grades for this module are just a pass or fail 😊
Like

Rebecca I know, I’m just reconsidering if this is the right course now so know it’ll only get harder.

The mark was hard enough to read, saving the feedback to ruin my day with tomorrow 😞 ...

Rhona Well I totally believe in you. It is hard but I promise it is manageable 😊❤️
Like

Openings - preannouncement

Establishing complaints: Descriptive detailing

Implied ECF to convince others of the seriousness of her situation.

Establishing complaints: corroboration

Use of idiom to convince others of complaint.
Rhona: Have a glass of vino! 🍷

Rebecca: Not! I don't touch a drop, I know one glass would be ok but the mood I'm in it'd be the bottle! Good job there's no chocolate in the house 😅

Rebecca: I really do need to read the feedback though, someone else in my tutor group had the feedback that she should have written more in the introduction, made more points, and written more about the ones she had made. Erm, what about that thing called a word count?!

Rhona: 😊 Using another’s experience to build complaint and convince the forum of her entitlement to complain.

Deleted post

Rebecca: My last module really boosted my confidence and made me feel like I actually had a brain, now not so much! I'm thinking of changing to the combined social science degree, I did so much better in that module!

We may need higher word counts but surely considering we don’t we shouldn’t be being penalised for not writing enough? I could have understood it if she'd been told that she needed to make fewer points but wrote more about each, but not more of everything, that’s impossible! 😞 X

Rhona: Yeah, don't rub it in! 😅 right now!

Use of contrast to convince others of entitlement to complain – good/bad marks

Rhona: Chocolate as a substitute!??

Rhona: I'm in bed using duvet as my fix!

Use of humour to displace the focus on the complaint and position Rebecca as reasonable – it is the object of the complaint that is the problem and not Rebecca.

Deleted post
Rebecca offers a fairly detailed account of why she should change her degree here: she’s metaphorically, ‘absolutely gutted’ and she ‘worked really hard’. She constructs herself as a hard-working student who deserves good marks and that her situation is unfair. She further constructs this frustrated and desperate position (see section 4.7) by building an image of her crying into her tea. The descriptive detailing works to justify her complaint. It undermines alternative reasons for her ‘poor marks’: that she is lazy or unmotivated, just as the participants did in McCreadie et al.’s (2018) and Drew’s (1998) research. Rebecca gains responses to her complaint which leads to further descriptive detailing. She explains that she has not read her feedback and then goes on to tell a small story to bolster and account for her complaint about her grades by complaining further about the tutors. This works to justify Rebecca’s complaint further. Having just explained she has not read her feedback she delicately shifts to explain that someone else had been told to write more, and the tutor had not considered the word count. The ‘erm what about that thing called a word count’ is sarcastic and works to construct Rebecca as outraged at this tutor’s behaviour. Rebecca is constructing the other student as a victim of her tutor’s unjustified expectations, like herself. Rebecca continues with contrast which justifies her stance by drawing on her marks on her previous module. She then returns to the word-count argument which further convinces and rallies support for her injustice. This descriptive detailing could arguably be off-putting for a reader who is not invested in the module. However, the detail is treated as important to be oriented to, as can be seen in the support offered by Celia and Rhona.

Another example can be seen, returning to Thread 2:

Thread 2: detailed complaining that an assignment has no mark

The OU just like to tease and torment. I was recommended trying to submit whatever i could for tma late, just in case. Have completed a special circumstances form. Anyhow, my tutor notified me he was unable to mark it. Then today i received notification it was marked and ready to collect, got slightly excited. Only to go on, see positive comments but no grade just Received Late in the box... Let down! Lol ahhh well at least i have passed the course bit, here’s hoping the ema will be successful!
We have already seen previously that Eva’s pre-announcement builds suspense. She then has to work to convince others of why the OU have been teasing and tormenting her. Eva takes her reader on her journey which builds her position of hard-done-to and justified to complain. The story details her experience. She was told to hand in something, even though her TMA was late. The mention of the commonly held knowledge of the ‘special circumstances form’ undermines the possibility that she will be told to fill one in from her audience, given the problem to follow. The use of ‘have completed’, ‘anyhow’, ‘then today’ and ‘only’ draws on temporal story-telling, building the suspense. The ‘slightly excited’ and ellipsis is then contrasted with the ‘let down’. She claims to have been teased because she thought her assignment would have a grade and tormented over the possibility that it might have after being told it would not be. The descriptive detail (Drew, 1998) builds her stance as justifiably entitled to complain - convincing others that she has still passed the module and that this is not the end of the world, however frustrating it may be. Interestingly, Eva does not receive any replies but she does receive some interaction via the 4 ‘likes’. These ‘likes’ could be akin to corroboration, which will be discussed later in the chapter. It could also be possible the complaint has been resolved so there is no need for responses.

6.4.2 Establishing complaints 2: The ECF

As was outlined in the literature review, Pomerantz (1986) showed that ECFs give a complaint power and help build the justification of the complainer. In terms of audience-design, Pomerantz (1986) said that in using ECFs, the speaker or reader may be constructing their discourse for an unsympathetic audience. It would seem unlikely that this is the case here, as the audience tends to be sympathetic throughout the data, yet ECFs are still employed. Returning to thread 1 and the opening thread, Rebecca says she ‘might as well do a different degree’ that she ‘stand[s] a chance of passing.’ The ECF here is actually the unspoken: that she doesn’t stand a chance of passing her degree. We can ascertain that this is an ECF because she is extracting the mark of one assignment to her possible attainment in her whole degree.

71 A special circumstances form is one that can be filled in and given to the module team so special circumstances such as illness and bereavement might be taken into consideration when the final module grade is being awarded.
Thread 1: Using an ECF to bolster a complaint

Rebecca accounts for this lower mark by explaining it is not her fault (she ‘worked really hard’), but it must be due to something else. The ECF is the unspoken corollary of ‘stand a chance of passing’, which works to build Rebecca’s case here. The implied ECF is that she will fail the module and
potentially the degree. It is very unlikely one lower score, so close to the start of the module (even if it is a fail) will mean failing the module overall. Moreover, alluding to an extreme outcome – having no chance of passing this degree - bolsters her complaint as justified: there are major issues at stake. On the other hand, it could be that she is undermining her own argument and that she is ‘throwing a strop’ because she has received a lower mark. However, as shown in the full thread at the start of this chapter, the students do not treat the post as ‘strop throwing’ but offer Rebecca support.

Another example comes in Thread 7, where the trouble is about students being given incorrect information, in this case conflicting information from the university and tutors about how much money they can be billed in one year. The trouble comes over the discussion of what entails an academic year. In Thread 7, Sandy’s post is treated by the others as a complaint that she has been told she cannot do a second module in the October presentation, when she has done one in the xxxx\textsuperscript{72} presentation, because she will be billed too much money. Others construct the information offered to Sandy as wrong, meaning trouble must be managed. This leads to further complaints as can be seen below. The ECF can be seen in Miranda’s first turn.

\textsuperscript{72} Redacted text: see appendix 5.
Thread 7: Using an ECF to complain about contradictory information

Sandy

Did anyone last year start 1 module in Oct and 1 in Feb. Because the ou are telling me I can't do 120 credits because I will have been charged to many fees in the year.

Rebecca

That's strange, I know someone who did 1 in October, 1 in Feb and is registered for 2 60 point modules starting in October.

Rebecca

That makes sense then, your academic year will start in whereas hers is from October so next October is a new year.
In Thread 7, Miranda contradicts the information Sandy has been given, explaining that she has been allowed to do several modules over the course of an academic year. The ECF comes in Miranda’s turn where she says she ‘always’ gets people who do not know what they are talking about as in Pomerantz’s (1986) study, helps position Sandy as justified in her questioning of her advice.

It would seem that ECFs are used in complaint sequences where sympathy is likely as well as when it is not (Pomerantz, 1986). The ECFs work to bolster the complaints. Rebecca is justified in asking for support and having a ‘strop’ because she might ‘not stand a chance of passing’ her degree, which is the extreme. Miranda is justified in complaining about the contradictory evidence from the university because she ‘always’ gets someone who does not know what they are talking about. Complaining in this forum is accepted, bolstered and built on.

6.4.3 Establishing complaints 3: using emphatics

One other noteworthy manner to build complaints is to use emphatic sentences. Emphatics help build discourses of shock and irritation. Complaint literature into telephone helplines demonstrates how participants emphatically deny reason when it is offered from a complaint handler (Edwards, 2005) and emphatically downplay other’s complaints about them (Stokoe and Hepburn, 2005). In the previous thread, Miranda’s emphatic sentences support Sandy and demonstrate her horror. Some examples are ‘That is ridiculous’ and ‘what are the OU paying him for?’ as well as ‘not sure you could get away with going AWOL like that in many jobs’. Like Weatherall and Stubbe’s (2015) research, emotion discourse is used to justify complaints as Miranda’s complaints against the tutor are bolstered and this works to offer support to Sandy. There is more discussion of this thread later.
Thread 7: Using emphatics

Sandy
I know Miranda I remember you saying about your results and that feels like a long time ago and I still haven't got mine!!
Like

Rebecca
Have you heard from your tutor to say why?
· Like

Sandy
Nope emailed him last Tuesday saying just curious about when we'll receive results and no reply.xx
· Like

Rebecca
I'd contact student support now. It's well over and if you've not heard anything then that's really not on
· Like

Miranda
I know I had mine back super early, the day after cut off, but that is ridiculous and even worse that you've not had a reply in a week! What are the OU paying him for?! I would get on to student support xx
· Like

Rebecca
I'd be a bit concerned that something had happened to him and no one knew!
· Like

Sandy
I did email student support today and they said they have emailed him. I'm thinking he's disappeared off the face of the earth but I know there was a tutorial the other day (I didn't go) so there would have been an email if it had been rearranged. Ahh x
Like

Miranda
That's so bad Sandy I hope he reappears and you get some kind of explanation. I know things can happen like illness or a family emergency but a courtesy email explaining would only take 2 minutes of time. Not sure you could get away with going awol like that in many jobs! Xx

Another example of emphasis being used to establish a complaint can be seen in thread 8. In thread 8, the trouble is that a tutorial was supposed to be running but it could not because of technical problems. The extract is from halfway down the thread from Rhona, where emphatic sentences develop the complaint.
Rhona constructs herself as angry, using several emphatic statements, beginning with ‘what the hell’. Later in the thread she uses more emphatic sentences like ‘I hope they are sorting this ASAP’, ‘This is not good enough’ and ‘This is stupid’. She uses these to account for her constructed state of anger. Rhona pulls in the rest of the group with the use of ‘we’ in the final turn. Interestingly, Rebecca does ‘the reasonable student’ (Like Stokoe and Hepburn’s (2005) reasonable complainers) and explains to Rhona that ‘nothing can be done’ and that it was a timing issue, so Rhona’s complaint has less force. This was also the case in thread 7 (see below) where Sandy reasons out Miranda’s emphatic complaint and explains that her tutor is not all that bad. He has been good with extensions. Although Sandy agrees with Miranda, she uses the disclaimer (Potter, 1996) ‘I don’t
want to complain too much but’ to soften her partial disagreement with Miranda’s strong emphatic statements.

**Thread 7: Softening out emphatics**

**Sandy** Yeah I know he has been really good with extensions for me for tma and so I don't want to complain too much but at least I asked for the extension lol and he always got them back to me within 5 days. The thing is I know he collected my assignment the day I submitted. I'm actually worried there's something wrong with my essay lol x

**Miranda** Maybe it's so good he has had to get someone else to mark it for him! Xx

**Sandy** Haha thanks but I doubt it. Was v rushed, wrote a lot of it off the top of my head and worried I haven't referenced properly but i'm sure it wouldn't be that much of a big deal. It is really strange I haven't heard from him though and it's hard to do any work until I receive my score x

What is interesting is that emphatics are used both by those building the initial complaints and by those responding to the initial complaint. This suggests that complaints are done to the extreme in this forum, which helps students build and account for discourses of discontent. This discontent can be built further by using alignment, as explored below.

### 6.4.4 Establishing complaints 4: Alignment, corroboration, mirroring and repetition

In Weatherall and Stubbe’s (2015) study on MS and phone calls to a utility bill helpline, alignment between call-takers and callers was often problematic, leading to escalating emotional discourse from the caller. Alignment in my data happened often and could be because the other is the University and the students are *all in it together*. Like Holt (2012) explains, when complaining about a third party, people tend to agree and align with the complainer. Corroboration and subsequent alignment are by far the main way complaints are established and built in this data. Returning to thread 5 as an example, the students are about to hand in their EMA, but their results for their previous assignment are not due back until after the submission of the EMA. This is constructed as problematic for the students because knowledge of their previous results could help them with their
EMA. The students use the personal pronoun and adverb/verb format throughout this extract. There are six repetitions of ‘still waiting’. We also see the use of ‘me too’. This mirroring (copying) of each other builds the complaint to be justified. If all students are waiting and all students construct this as an issue the complaints must be ‘true’. We can see how alignment is not problematic here. The end of the complaint will be dealt in section 6.6.

Thread 5: Corroboration on waiting for marks

I really need my results back now, anyone else still waiting? 😞

| Annie | I am still waiting. |
| Ellie | It’s actually torturous!! |
| Annie | I know. I have submitted my EMA which is silly. When are they supposed to be back. |
| Ellie | I think they are due back on the ema cut off day! Sigh..... would have been nice to get a final spur on before I faced the final hurdle! Well done for submitting, mines still waiting for me to tweak it a bit before I send!!! |
All the students in this thread are complaining about the same thing (‘I’m still waiting’; ‘I know’; ‘echoing all the statements above’; ‘me too’) or upgrading (‘hasn’t been collected yet’). The complaint, due to the alignment and upgrading, becomes magnified.
We can also see this alignment done by mirroring and use of the personal pronoun in Thread 9, where Rebecca is advising another student on how to reach the word-count. The ‘trouble’ (Drew, 1998) being negotiated here is that different tutors offer different information. This is built by students highlighting the different advice they have been given. The mirroring can be seen by the repetition of ‘I was told’, so again we see this pattern of use of the personal pronoun and repetition. This works to convince each participant in the thread that they are correct and in highlighting the discrepancies between tutors, who never ‘agree on what’ they are ‘supposed to be doing’, the mirroring works to invite solidarity among the students.

**Thread 9: corroborating that tutors give different information**

![Chat screen showing Rebecca's message: I was told to add 2 or 3 things previous research if that helps. Rhona responds: I was told 1 or 2. Rebecca then says: I don't think any 2 tutors ever agree on what we're supposed to be doing!]

A similar pattern can be seen from thread 7. Sandy opens up the trouble of a lack of TMA return to convince others of, and account for her right to be an unhappy, frustrated complainant. The complaint is built by mirroring and the use of the personal pronoun to do consensus again:

**Thread 7: corroborating that tutors are no good**

![Chat screen showing Sandy: What's even more frustrating is I haven't even received my results yet! Miranda responds: Omg Sandy, that's awful! I'm shocked at how bad tutors have been with the OU with my own issues and hearing so many others it's really not good enough xx]

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We can see here the use of the personal pronoun and verb to build up the complaint and complainant as justified. Again, this is often positioned at the start of the posts suggesting that it is important that each poster aligns with the others. Miranda claims she is ‘shocked’ that Sandy has not had her results. Sandy corroborates with ‘I know’. Rebecca then enters the thread and we see this use of the personal pronoun and mirroring to further build the complaint. Rebecca says, ‘I’d contact student support’ and Miranda also mirrors, ‘I would get on to student support’. Sandy
retorts with ‘I did email student support’. It is possible Sandy’s discourse manages the trouble of being accused of not doing enough by convincing others by mirroring.

More mirroring using the personal pronoun can be seen in thread 10. Here the complaint is the module and how much the students dislike it. Jemima opens the thread with a problem. Jane and Kevin then reply mirroring ‘I’m the same’.

Thread 10: corroborating on having done no work

So here, by mirroring each other discursively, the position of the disempowered student is worked up and made available. Jane explains she is ‘struggling’ and Kevin comments that he is the ‘same’. All the posters work to convince the others that they are behind. The result of this is a disempowered, victimised identity as students blame a ‘terrible module’ for their lack of motivation. If everyone contributing to this part of the thread is ‘the same’ then the construction is that it must be right and solidarity is achieved (Holt, 2012).
Alignment and mirroring often arise when students complain about the collaborative forums. Collaborative forums are ones where students do tasks related to their studies. On the Facebook threads, the collaborative forums are frequently constructed as ‘scary’ and ‘full of people showing off’. Students who do use the collaborative forums have to manage how this positions them, and likewise, those who do not use the collaborative forums have to account for the opposite. Both positions could be problematic for the students so they must carefully manage their accountability. In thread 11, where the opening cannot be posted for issues of ethical consent, we see the students mirroring to construct this dislike of the forums.

Thread 11: mirroring problems with collaborative forums

Cindy

Me three! They are too overwhelming for me. Too much to read.

Sally

I agree as well. I haven't written in them, I'd rather spend my time on reading material and preparing for our assessments than writing back to them!

Demi

Same here, I wrote that in part 3 of the assignment. If I don't feel thick before I go on the forum, I certainly do afterwards!! This group is far better 😊 x
Penny has said it perfectly. I am the first to admit those forums intimidate me in a big way and I don't feel as smart, or as with it as some of those posters. But, I do read them because the info is really good and I did promise my tutor to give it a go, which I did and I wasn't ridiculed or made to feel that stupid (except for what I was thinking in my own head!). You don't have to participate in them, but you can always give it a try once 😊. And like has said, just because big words are being used, does not mean that they are that knowledgeable 😊.

Julie The thing is even the people who sound like they know what they are doing feel exactly the same. We are all learning. I think when I write on there, I write more articulately than I would on here, it's just how I write academically and sometimes it can be a bit disheartening to come on here and see others posting about showing off etc.

Julie Exactly. I think that everyone who posts on their initially feels like they would rather not and panics that they are getting it wrong, or that they aren't as intelligent as others- even the ones who write with the most extensive vocabulary. Most of us are all in the same boat, and not many know more than others. I think it's something where you grow in confidence over time. I'm used to them now because my previous two modules they have been compulsory, but I still go "oh god what if I'm making an arse of mysel" but I give it a go. That's what I mean about coming and reading some negative comments about it on here (not saying this post particularly) but everyone is just trying to do their best 😊.

Like
The mirroring can be seen at the start of the examples although it does move into a more troubled narrative later, where Penny and Julie, as collaborative forum users, have to work to avoid accusations of being ‘show-offs’ and account for their actions. At the start of the thread Cindy, Sally, Demi and Penny mirror each other’s prose with ‘me three’; ‘I agree’ and ‘same here’. Penny works to avoid being accused of being a ‘show-off’ and partially mirrors the previous posters. She says ‘(name omitted for ethical reasons) has said it perfectly’, that she also is not intelligent enough to use the forums. Penny then has to justify why she is not completely in alignment with the others and she does this by explaining her reason for using the forum (she promised her tutor she would try it).

This thread also shows that the students are not always in alignment, however, and trouble (Drew, 1998) does appear. Some of the students do use the collaborative forums and have to manage this misalignment. Julie, for example, has to manage being constructed as a ‘show-off’. Of particular interest is Julie’s change in register. When she writes, ‘oh god what if I’m making an arse of mysel’ (sic.), she could be argued to be constructing herself as ‘resisting academic identity’ (Stokoe et al., 2013), so even though she is not doing complete alignment she is not completely distancing herself from the others. She minimises her investment in the forums before claiming to support them (stake inoculation). xxx

It is interesting here to see how alignment shifts in this thread. At first, using the collaborative forums is constructed as not useful but by the end of the thread the agreement is that it is. This shift in alignment could account for the thread ending.

The participants do not always align with each other, as above. It is also clear that sometimes it is appropriate to not position oneself as academic in this forum, much like the students in Stokoe et al.’s (2013) research. We can see this again in the following example on collaborative forums. Disalignment is managed by mirroring and using ‘but’. Potential trouble arises as Rhona, a collaborative forum user, offers advice, when she does use the forum. She has to prevent being accused of being too academic for the Facebook forum.

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73 Redacted text: see appendix 5.
Thread 12: using hedging to avoid aligning

Penny

Ok once again....Online collaborative forums. I done a few in the beginning, but now, have not looked at them. I don't have the time, am I the only one? And should I be worried?

Jenny  I havent taken part in any 😞

· Like

Rhona  I wouldn't be worried but I think you have to do next weeks one because we are inputting our participants data x

There is some really interesting alignment/disalignment going on here, where Penny and Rhona disclaim before asking for and offering advice, using 'but', yet Jenny does not hedge at all. Penny asks for advice on the collaborative forums, requesting solidarity, that it is alright not to take part in them ('have not looked at them' and 'should I be worried?'). Rhona offers advice but has to mitigate against being accused of recommending that students take part in the forums. The shared knowledge in the forum is that the collaborative forums are not worth doing, so Rhona has to save face and account for her actions. She explains to Penny and Jenny that as far as she is aware, not taking part in the collaborative forums is not a problem until the following week. The first part of her statement aligns with Jenny and Penny's constructions of not taking part. However, the second part of the statement aligns with Penny's 'worry' and suggests that yes, she should be taking part. To construct herself as friendly and not be accused of being difficult, Rhona uses an ‘x’ at the end. This means she is less likely to be accused of being a know it all.

Later on in the thread Rhona further manages her stance by saying:

Rhona  I just find it nice to bounce off other people 😊

The disclaimer of ‘just’ minimises Rhona's stance and avoids accusations of being overly academic, again like the students in Stokoe et al.,’s (2013) research. The metaphor of ‘bounce off other people’ constructs the collaborative forums as light places and not places to fear. Rhona also uses this to
account for her use of the forums and prevent trouble arising. The smiley further can be seen as a use of mitigating face threat. Rhona is claiming using the forums is not threatening and a place for all ‘ordinary’ students. She ‘just’ uses forums to chat about her ideas. There is no threat.

A final example of mirroring and alignment can be seen in Thread 13, which is focused around complaining about the module. Lizzy opens with a complaint that she ‘has not enjoyed the module’ and that she is ‘past caring’. This time we see how procrastination is aligned to which builds and fuels complaints.

Thread 13: corroborating procrastination

Lizzy begins by claiming that she has not written her EMA. Teresa and Laura align with her by saying they also have not or have just started. ‘This module’ is mirrored via repetition, as well as the claim they did not like it and again we see the personal pronoun repeated to build the complaint.

Furthermore, the students repeat ‘best start’, ‘only started today’ and ‘going to start today’. This repetition enforces the construction that it is normal to dislike the module and usual to start writing late. This module is bad and the students are not at fault (Dersley and Wooton, 2000).

This example leads us on to the use of contrast, the final technique identified that the students use to build complaints.
6.4.5 Establishing complaints 5: Use of contrast

In the previous example (thread 13) it was seen that students contrasted the ‘bad module’ and ‘good students’ to position themselves as not at fault (Dersley and Wooton, 2000) and account for their lack of work on a TMA. In Stokoe and Hepburn’s (2005) paper, they examine how contrast is used to justify neighbourhood complaints to a helpline. They give an example where Ann has been accused by a neighbour of being too noisy. Ann uses contrast to explain that her children are just playing in an ordinary way, and that the ‘bad neighbour’ is actually the one who complains about Ann and she is the ‘good, ordinary neighbour’. In my dataset, using contrast was also a way of building complaints. It can be seen above, and in further examples below.

One contrast students draw on, is between their previous tutors and their current ones, which works to bolster the veracity of their complaints. We get an explicit example of this in Thread 14 where Erin starts off the thread complaining about her tutor. She claims that her last tutor ‘was so good and really helpful’ whereas this tutor is making her feel ‘demotivated’. Sandy uses contrast to bolster and align with the complaint later in the thread. She says her last tutor was ‘brilliant’ and ‘really, really good’ whereas her current tutor took ‘3 weeks’ to reply to an email.
Thread 14: Contrasting good and bad tutors

Erin

Is anyone else having issues with their tutor for this module? I'm struggling to get any response from mine at all, my tutor for my previous module was so good and really helpful so now I feel a bit demotivated by this one. Struggling to do part 2 of TMA without my TMA feedback as well 😞

Like  Comment

Penny

It states in the student notes that you are to be given the feedback for part 2. I would get in touch with them again and bring that to their attention.

Sandy

Your tutor isn't is it by any chance? X

Like

Erin

I've emailed her so many times already and had no response. She said that my referencing wasn't quite right for the last couple of TMA's but everytime I email to ask what's wrong with it and how I can change it I don't get a response. So frustrating because I'm doing it exactly the same as my last module which was fine

Like

Erin

No Sandy I take it you're having issues as well lol

Like

Sandy

Yeah I don't email him much but last time I did it took him 3 weeks to reply. He never ever sends out emails with guidance or anything. In my last module my tutor was brilliant. Send notes of tutorials, guidance, replied to emails within hours. She was really good. I've done this course all my by myself basically x

Like

Erin

Mines exactly the same, and my last tutor was brilliant as well. Sounds like we're in the same boat I'll be glad when this modules over!
Both Sandy and Erin validate that their tutors are bad and that their previous tutors were good. This constructs the new tutors as at fault for the students’ lack of motivation. The students have to account for why their new tutors are not satisfying them, so they use contrast to do this and move the responsibility of their progress onto the tutors and away from themselves. Again, these discourses suggest complaining is a popular strategy used in this forum, and that discourses of bad and good tutors are readily available to these students. This is reminiscent of the ‘good’ stepmothers and ‘bad’ biological mothers in Roper’s (2017) research.

A similar scenario can be found if we return to thread 3. In the second turn, Jenny says, ‘it’s unfair how most tutors are giving their students the results but some are not’ implying that the tutors who are not giving out the results are ‘bad’ and those that are giving out the results are ‘good’. 
Thread 3: contrasting good and bad tutors

Furthermore, in a return to Thread 7, we see the contrast being built up over the whole thread. Miranda explains that ‘it’s really not good enough’ that Sandy is still waiting for her results and backs this up with the point that she has had her ‘own issues’. This narrative of ‘bad tutor’ is built up further as Miranda does consensus with Rebecca, building the complaint around her ‘bad’ tutor who is getting paid to mark and is not doing it on time. What is also interesting about this thread though, is that the ‘bad’ tutor becomes a ‘good’ tutor towards the end of the thread (see below the thread for analysis).
Thread 7: Working through what it means to be a good and/or bad tutor

Sandy: What's even more frustrating is I haven't even received my results yet!

Miranda: Omg! Sandy, that's awful! I'm shocked at how bad tutors have been with the OU with my own issues and hearing so many others it's really not good enough xx

Sandy: I know. Miranda, I remember you saying about your results and that feels like a long time ago and I still haven't got mine!!

Rebecca: Have you heard from your tutor to say why?

Sandy: No, I've emailed him last Tuesday saying just curious about when we'll receive results and no reply.xx

Rebecca: I'd contact student support now. It's well over and if you've not heard anything then that's really not on

Miranda: I know I had mine back super early, the day after cut off, but that is ridiculous and even worse that you've not had a reply in a week! What are the OU paying him for?! I would get on to student support xx

Rebecca: I'd be a bit concerned that something had happened to him and no one knew!

Sandy: I did email student support today and they said they have emailed him. I'm thinking he's disappeared off the face of the earth but I know there was a tutorial the other day (I didn't go) so there would have been an email if it had been rearranged. Ahh

Miranda: That's so sad. Sandy, I hope he reappears and you get some kind of explanation. I know things can happen like illness or a family emergency but a courtesy email explaining would only take 2 minutes of time. Not sure you could get away with going awol like that in many jobs! Xx
The complexity of contrast is apparent here. It is not always the case that tutors are constructed as totally bad or completely good. Miranda and Sandy have to negotiate their way through this thread to reach the outcome that perhaps it is not a result of ‘lazy’ tutoring but a problem with her assignment that is causing the delay. The ‘lazy’ construction of the tutor of ‘what are the OU paying him for’ by Miranda needs to be backtracked, as Rebecca and Sandy work up a discourse of reason. Rebecca suggests it is not unreasonable to suspect something has happened to the tutor due to his lack of response. However, Sandy then reconstructs her identity as victim of a bad tutor, by saying she has emailed student support and she still has heard nothing. She explains that her tutorial was not cancelled, which suggests her tutor is working. Miranda continues her harsher approach and claims that an email of explanation would not take long. She backs it up with ‘you wouldn’t get away with going awol like that in many jobs’— constructing the tutor as selfish and not really thinking about the students. The contrast comes in the next few lines as Sandy downgrades this extreme (although corroborative and supportive) position (see section 5.4.2) by praising her tutor for allowing her extensions and claims he is ‘not that bad’. This ‘reasonableness’ is treated as convincing by Miranda. It is clear that contrast is not always straightforwardly used to complain about tutors. They can be ‘good’ and ‘bad’ within the same thread.

In thread 15, the contrast is between good tutors and bad tutors but also between good marks and bad marks. Here the complaint is again about tutor marking, but this time Jane constructs her tutor as not knowing what he is doing. She provides evidence by positioning herself as confused
(see section 4.4.1) and that her TMA was ‘500 words short’, yet she got a better mark for it. What is interesting here is the extent of the use of contrast and that different contrasts can be used to complain about two issues simultaneously. Interestingly this thread has no response from the other students.

Thread 15: contrasting good marks and bad marks

Jane

I just got my TMA score back! I had a higher mark than in the last marked TMA despite being 500 words short..... its great but at the same time i dont get it. TMA i was happy with, i worked hard on, but had a lower mark than this one, that was a complete jumble that i didnt wanna do and didnt understand!!! has anyone else felt their tutors markings a bit all over the shop??

From the above threads it can be seen in comparison to Stokoe and Hepburn’s (2005) paper, that contrasts position students as ‘justified to complain’. They often draw on the ‘reasonable student’ position, as victims of ‘poor tutoring’ and as those that deserve better. The use of contrast works to bolster and develop this position of the ‘hard-done-to’ student. Contrast, however, is not straightforwardly deployed. To save face, extreme use of contrast can be backtracked.

Taking all this together we can see that the students draw on several techniques to complaint about their tutors and module. Detailing (Stokoe and Hepburn, 2005; Al-Momani, 2014) works to convince others of the authenticity of complaints. ECFs (Pomerantz, 1986) and emphatics are used to build the complaints. Using alignment was a very extensive technique, as was contrast. It is clear that there are parallels with previous research. This joint co-construction of written complaints is something that has not been attended to in much detail in the research on CA/DP and complaints and is therefore an addition to previous research. This suggests that certain forums are places to go to complain (i.e., including some, but not just, education ones) and that once complaining in a forum is an established practice, participants can gain support to bolster that complaint. There were examples of complaints being challenged. However, this was done in a way to save the face of the complainer through use of disclaimers.
6.5 Endings of complaint threads

Endings are complicated because the ending of a complaint may not be the end of a thread, or a thread might end before a complaint does. This is unlike phone calls, which have more of an established ‘bounded sequence’ (Drew, 1998, p.344). However, some patterns were identified in my data. Complaint endings do often come at the end of a thread and are characterised by the use of idioms, ‘x’, exclamation marks and emoji.

6.5.1 Complaint thread endings 1: idioms

Drew and Holt (1988) explained that idioms are used in complaints for two purposes: to report details and to state a complaint. Idioms are also drawn on because they demonstrate shared knowledge and such sharing can offer support. An example of a metaphor from Drew and Holt’s (1988) work is ‘banging your head against a brick wall’ which is used to emphasise that the complainer on the phone is getting nowhere in trying to get papers from a legal company (Drew and Holt, 1988, p.406). This metaphor was used to close a complaint. Another example Drew and Holt give is when Lottie is complaining about a hotel’s service and she summarises this with ‘it’s gone tuh pot’ at the end of her complaint sequence (Drew and Holt, 1988, p.401). Drew and Holt (1988) conclude that their findings may be dependent on situation and that idioms may be used within an environment where there is some sort of conversational trouble.

Idioms are used within the complaint sequences above and at the end. One popular idiom is the metaphor ‘all in the same boat’ (see section 5.4.2). In thread 4, Miranda uses ‘I am in the exact same boat’ to complain about her marks and align with Demi.
Thread 4: using idiom to align and close a thread

Has anyone got their marks back yet?

I got mine last night

I’m quite disappointed with mine, I got marked down for including info that the student notes told me to include

Miranda, I feel your pain. I am in the exact same boat and will be calling student support tomorrow. I got marked down for doing exactly what the student notes have said about mentioning briefly what and who studied, as it was descriptive and pointless and I should have used that talk about the usefulness for say how it helped change in , which was in my second paragraph! I then got marked down again because I didn't recognise and describe he main undertaken by as it was marked as not quite achieved! xx

Moves on to discuss new topic about reading feedback

Here Miranda uses the boat idiom to align with Demi in the final post on this complaint before the thread moves on to a new topic. Miranda has to account for this position, so claims she is a victim of harsh tutor marking by detailing her tutor’s lack of knowledge and explaining she got ‘marked down’ for including things the student notes suggested. This pattern of idiom and alignment frequently happens at the end of complaint sequences in the forum and can be seen again in thread 5.
Thread 5: Ending a complaint thread in a miserable boat

Ellie closes the thread by using the metaphor ‘in my miserable boat’. This alignment works to bolster the students’ complaints. They are all in it together. It is also interesting that the tone is ironically lightened here by the use of the idiom and the fact the boat is miserable. The contrast between ‘miserable’ and ‘haha’ pulls the reader in to align with Ellie. The ‘haha’ and x lighten the tone and demonstrates Ellie is making light of a difficult situation. The move to lighten the tone, indexes closure. It may also suggest that to continue complaining is a stigmatised identity and one Ellie is moving away from.

The same can be seen in Thread 2.

Thread 2: Ending a complaint thread by being in the same boat
We can see in Thread 2 Erin uses ‘in the same boat’ to align with Sandy and close the complaint that her tutor is not responding to her emails. Like in spoken discourse, idiom is used to summarise and close the complaint (Drew and Holt, 1988). This complaint could be seen to be quite bounded (Drew, 1998) in that there is a clear beginning (that Erin is ‘having issues’ with her tutor) and development (others align and agree with her) and an ending (they are all ‘in the same boat’). Complaints are not always as clearly bounded, however.

6.5.2 Complaint endings 2: Using ‘me too’ to complete a complaint thread

One other way to complete a complaint thread was to use ‘me too’. This has the impact of corroborating, aligning and building the complaint. We can see the use of ‘me too’ below, in the final turn. In Thread 14 the students are complaining that they cannot get on to the website to complete their iCMA. For some reason the section they need to get on to is not working. The use of ‘me too’ comes in the last turn where Celia aligns with the rest of the group that she also cannot get on to the module website. In this data set at least, there is a pattern of ending complaints with ‘me too’.

Thread 14 (see section 6.4.5 for full thread): using ‘me too’ to complete a thread

6.5.3 Complaint endings 3: the use of punctuation

Another way complaint threads are completed is by the use of the ‘x’, ‘haha’ and emoji or the exclamation mark, as can be seen in the above examples (Thread 2 with an exclamation mark and Thread 5 with ‘haha’ and an ‘x’ and thread 4 with an exclamation mark and two ‘x’ s). A further example of this can be seen in Thread 16, where Jimmy is blaming the others in the forum for preventing him doing his assignment. Some students had worked out that if they had already got over xx74 on the continuous assessment then they did not have to do TMAxx75, as it would make no difference to their overall grade. Blaming others could be a ‘face-threatening act’ because those Jimmy is complaining about are ‘in the same boat’ as him and the readers may not like that

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74 Redacted: see appendix 5.
75 Redacted: see appendix 5.
he is constructing them as at fault. To mitigate against this, and account for his position, he uses humour.

Thread 16: Using ‘x’ and humour to backtrack a complaint

Really need to pull my finger out with tma, I was all set for smashing it out then I looked on here saw that some people aren't doing it, checks my OCAS realised I could miss it an not iv lost the motivation to do it! Im not leaving it, but have totally lost all motivation I had to finish it!

Jimmy constructs himself as running late with the TMA and blames the others on the forum for his change in motivation. He claims he was originally going to be ‘smashing it out’ or doing it quickly, but now he has read that other people on the forum are not doing it, he positions himself as a demotivated student. There are several corroborative posts after this, but in contrast to corroboration, Rhona offers advice, in the form of ‘a warning’.

Rhona explains that his module result may be important to his future. Backtracking, Jimmy says he will
submit it and uses ‘haha’ and ‘x’ to complete the thread, which allows him to accept Rhona’s advice yet still account for why he has no motivation.

6.5.4 Complaint endings 4: Resolution

Complaints are not always resolved in the data. Where there are examples of problems being resolved, these usually result in bounded sequences (Drew, 1998). An example comes in thread 3, where the trouble of having no ‘results’ is resolved. Via the use of idiom and thanks, Hayley thanks Jenny for giving her the notes she needs to complete her assignment and calls Jenny a ‘star’ – a metaphor that classifies Jenny as a bright light in the darkness of assignment hell.

Thread 3: resolving trouble

There is a further example of complaint resolution in Thread 1. This thread was the one where Rebecca was complaining about her module and that she wanted to withdraw. She returns to complete the complaint, hence creating a ‘bounded sequence’ (Drew, 1998). Below, Stacey has just aligned herself with the others on the thread. Rebecca replies, having been in touch with student support. She now must manage her accountability for adjusting her stance on her complaint. By shifting her footing and reporting on her conversation, Rebecca does this and resolves her complaint. She works to convince other students that this module is harder than previous modules and that it is normal for marks to ‘drop’. She corroborates with Stacey, claiming they are in it together, but hedges with the use of ‘it sounds like’. In this way, she is not accusing Stacey of having lower marks too but is convincing her that the reason for these lower marks is normal, and not the fault of the students, but the module. This way she normalises and adjusts their student identity —
they are ordinary students who are following a set pattern and not necessarily victims, therefore the lower marks are acceptable. Rebecca moves from victim, to being reasonable and a supporter of others. It is important to note here too, that the end of the complaint is not the end of the thread (see above for full thread).

**Thread 1: closing a complaint**

There are similarities between my findings and Drew and Holt’s (1998) into spoken data. We can see that in written data, sometimes idioms are also used to close complaint sequences. Also, some complaint sequences in this forum can be seen to be ‘bounded’ (Drew, 1998). However, there are differences too. This is interesting given that closing complaints may be different in the environment of an online forum than in phone conversations. Sequences are not always bounded and may just ‘fizzle out’. Yet there are similarities, echoing Meredith and Stokoe (2014), where they argue that online interaction adapts spoken talk, rather than being completely different.

**6.6 Conclusions**

This chapter asked: How do distance-learners open, build and close their complaints in an informal Facebook forum? It has become clear from the analysis above that students can open with pre-announcements, delayed announcements or clear announcements; build complaints by description, ECFs, emphasis, alignment and contrast and end some complaint threads with the use of idiom, ‘me too’, laughter and affect displays (emoji and punctuation). These findings could be read as being relevant to student behaviour in two different ways. It could be argued that by constructing themselves in these particularly negative ways, students ‘give up’ responsibility to their tutors and the module and not themselves. They build identities of students who are not at fault. This means a subject position of being disempowered as a student is made available and the
position is taken up by other students. The identity of excited and enthusiastic student is replaced by something that builds solidarity, but not necessarily in a positive way.

In relation to the previous literature, it is perhaps surprising that complaints did not always need to be worked up, unlike Edwards’ (2005) findings. There is indeed evidence here of complaints being worked up over a number of turns, but this is not always the case. Sometimes students launch into their complaint straight away, suggesting that the forum accepts this and that coming to the forum to complain is a common and useful strategy for the students. Indeed, the students rarely challenge complaints outright, and if there is trouble, much tends to be made of hedging to save face.

The types of complaints being addressed in this dataset differ in terms of what has been researched before from a CA/DP perspective. Unlike previous work (Stokoe and Hepburn, 2005; Al-Momani, 2014; Macreadie et al., 2018; Weatherall and Stubbe, 2015), this research is based on data from a social media forum. The complaints in this dataset are indirect (Edwards, 2005) and not normally aimed at the audience that receive the complaints. Drew (1998) explains we choose the people we complain to and the right kind of complaints align with the chosen recipients.

It is possible there is no need to hedge as frequently in written data as there is in spoken interaction, especially if one of the purposes of an online forum which has no formal tutor input is to vent. In this case, in this forum, it appears to be the norm that complaining is acceptable, so coming to the forum to complain means a student will receive support to bolster and justify the complaint.

The structure of complaint sequences in the forum is different and similar to previously researched sequences. The complaint sequences do have a beginning and a build. They are not always completed sequences, however, and nor do they need to be. This is in contrast to Drew’s (1998) findings, who demonstrated that complaints on the phone have clear beginnings and endings. Complaint endings, when they do happen can end in idiom, such as ‘in the same boat’, which summarises and aligns posters with each other. This research also demonstrated other discursive techniques used in complaint endings, such as ‘me too’ and the use of ‘haha’ and ‘x’. ‘Haha’ and ‘x’ can be used to ensure careful understanding of a response in a complaint sequence, perhaps in appreciating irony in the case of ‘haha’, or doing friendliness, in the case of ‘x’.
In terms of identity, the students are constructing themselves as hard-done-to, victims and not at fault (Dersley and Wooton, 2000). It may be argued that this is similar to Edwards’ (2005) point that complainers work to avoid being accused of being a complainer but instead, talk about a justifiable problem. These students certainly work to justify why they are reasonable complainers, just like Stokoe and Hepburn’s (2005) research into neighbourhood mediation services and Macreadie et al.’s (2018) research into healthcare complaints. To do these identities, students draw on emotion discourse (Weatherall and Stubbe, 2015) and contrast what is bad and good. There therefore develops a repertoire of academic blame where writers often (but not always) position themselves in opposition to a system that is not supporting them.

When students complain, they orient to normative expectations of ‘doing complaining’ in the forum. They account for their own part in the event that has given rise to the complaint. They manage the prospect of being held accountable for the complaint by blaming others and other situations. In response to these complaints, techniques such as corroboration, consensus and contrast emerge to build ‘social solidarity’ (Holt, 2012, p.430), which may be a supportive strategy for the students in itself. Furthermore, in this forum, the OU becomes a provider of a service and students their dissatisfied, disenfranchised and unhappy, paying customers of a poor service provider. On the back of this, this research demonstrates the importance of taking students’ indirect complaints seriously.
7 Discussion and Implications

This research is important for several reasons. Firstly, unlike previous research in student forums it demonstrates how complex student discourse and identity is on social media. Secondly, it shows how this complexity can lead to different discursive outcomes, sometimes positive in offering solace to students and sometimes more negative in building a culture of disempowered discourses. Thirdly, there are significant applications of my research, such as helping students understand what happens in Facebook forums via CARM-text workshops. This will help students prepare for such interactions and bring a critical and informed eye to the process. The research could also raise awareness of these forums for staff at universities by illuminating the complex business students attend to in forums such as Facebook.

This final chapter concludes and evaluates the research overall. It summarises the findings and examines how they have built on, supported and challenged previous research, followed by an evaluation of the study and more detail on the practical applications mentioned above.

7.1 Overall conclusions

The main research question was ‘what learner identities do students construct in a Facebook forum and how do they do it?’ My research has innovatively shown a range of available identities and how these are built and used to ask for and offer help, advice and support and complain. It has shown how identity shifts in the forum as discursive purposes change.

Chapters 4-6 illustrate the following:

- Chapter four demonstrated students construct identities of seekers, strugglers, stressed and anxious, desperate, jokers, panickers, procrastinators, and obsessives to ask for help, advice and support and that these identities are [usually] successful in generating responses orientated to as helpful.

- Chapter five demonstrated students construct identities of helpers, advisors and supporters (which was split into categories of reporters, corroborators, encouragers, fantasisers and sympathisers) to offer help, advice and support and that these identities are generally also orientated to as helpful.
Chapter six examined how complaints are managed. It investigated how complaints are opened by using announcements and how they are established, using descriptive detailing, the ECF, emphatics, alignment and contrast. Chapter six also demonstrated how complaints are closed and/or resolved by using idiom, ‘me too’ and punctuation and emoji.

The evidence is important because it tells us that these students collectively use Facebook to gain help, advice and support, with the implication that they are not accessing the right sort of support from elsewhere. Facebook support differs from what the university can offer and gives students a space that fills in that missing ‘something’. It would seem peer-to-peer discourse, where the particular power relations between students and staff are not an issue, is an important vehicle of support for some students.

My research also demonstrates that Facebook forums are both places of solace and can also build discourses of panic and despair. We can see solace especially in chapter five, which shows how community builds in the forum, as students offer each other help, support and advice. That is not to say there is never discursive trouble, such as the rule stickler in section 5.5, but that overall, there are discursive rules the students know and follow. Similarly, solace can be found in chapter six, when complaining - an acceptable act in this forum. However, whereas having a place to go to complain and resolve problems may be useful, there are also instances whereby complaining in ‘public’, students engage in more negative discourse. An example of this can be seen in chapter six, where students complain about their marks or their hate of collaborative forums, and account for these by blaming the module or their tutors instead. The responsibility holds others and other things to account and not the student.

An example of panic is available in chapter 4, where constructing oneself as stressed leads to others jumping on the stress bandwagon and builds more panic. Interestingly, the use of humour can sometimes bring this down. It is important to understand how these dynamics are occurring, so educators can understand students from the ground-up. Rather than starting from the stance that students should fit in to academia the way it is structured, it is useful to start from where they are, what their approach is and discover how students and educators can learn from this.
7.2 Literature connections

Literature connections were discussed in some detail at the end of each analysis chapter, so the aim here is to bring all this together to illuminate the importance of the findings. Given that this research was only done on one forum though, we should always be aware that other forums may generate different patterns of activity.

7.2.1 Student identity

My research demonstrates performed student identities are complex, multifaceted, multi-layered and constantly in flux which builds on previous research. Although Farr and Riordan’s (2010) research, for example, showed student teachers moved identities from ‘professional’ to ‘student’ throughout a forum, my analysis explains identity movement is even more complex. Students are managing many other identities that are made relevant to their discourse (parents, partners, employees etc) as well as being a student – both as successful and potentially failing ones. Different identities of the stressed, desperate and obsessed student, for example, can all be drawn on at the same time, as in chapter 4. They may be complaining and offering support as in chapter 6. This is further complicated by what it means to be a student on Facebook and even more so at a distance learning university. Such identities should not be seen as separate entities but constantly overlapping and evolving. Once again, by understanding these dynamics, students can be offered more effective support by universities.

The complexities of these identities being managed demonstrates further how enmeshed our identities are in discourse and the available positions when chatting online. For example, my research uncovered that although there were instances of resisting academic identity, such as Lizzy in chapter 4 when she was joking about reaching the word count, there was also clear evidence students would construct themselves as knowledgeable and a ‘good student’ such as when help is offered in 5.2.3. As in Benwell and Stokoe’s (2002) research, the identity of ‘good student’ was managed carefully. This was done by packaging knowledge in a way that was unthreatening to the other posters. One possible reason for such careful management could be related to Hughes’ (2010) thematic findings from interviews, where those who were overly academic in tutor-led forums tended to be rejected. My research makes us aware how students manage and avoid the position of ‘rejected forum member’. Furthermore, in contrast to Stokoe et al.’s (2013) research, my participants did not treat being a hard-worker as a problem, like when Rebecca is making a complaint over her marks in chapter 6 and the
students rally round her. This is important because it tells us being a student is not just about orienting to an ambivalent identity, but there are other identities being drawn on at the same time.

My research also highlights that ‘not that academic’ is an available position in an OU Facebook forum, and not only done in corridors, the classroom and at home (Stokoe et al., 2013). This tells us that this is an available position for both brick and distance-learning students to draw on, and we can see this in Penny’s ‘just wanting a pass’ in 4.7.

Because of the use of discursive psychology instead of thematic analysis (e.g., Selwyn’s (2009) study) the complexity of student Facebook practices becomes clearer. Whereas my research did concur with some of Selwyn’s (2009) research and found that students did cultivate an identity of ‘struggling’ (see section 4.5), did discuss their tutors and did help each other out, in opposition, I found many students (although not all) constructed themselves as being deeply invested in their work. Furthermore, my study showed that on the back of this shared understanding (that it is acceptable to be invested in studying), doing being knowledgeable when helping or advising is valued. My research has demonstrated that using discursive analysis can illustrate that helping and striving to do well matters and what the function of these are (such as gaining or offering support), rather than simply classifying them into categories.

My research builds on the little previous research into student behaviour on Facebook, as advocated by Coughlan and Perryman (2005), who were keen for further research to be done and academics to recognise and promote the more positive sides of Facebook, such as emotional support (solace). However, in contrast to Coughlan and Perryman’s (2005) quantitative study, my research demonstrated that negative discourse was also quite extensive (e.g., the complaints chapter). The benefit of using discursive research instead of taking a more ‘neutral’ or representational approach to language use, is that it can address complexities of students’ discussions, the manner in which students orientate to such discussions, and the responses generated in much more detail. It can demonstrate the flexible and variable patterns that emerge, highlighting how, for example, discourse can facilitate the take up of subject positions which may be constructed as negative, such as disempowerment – a flexible position that also functions to build solidarity in the forum and construct a group who are ‘all in the same boat’.
7.2.2  Support forum research

My findings demonstrate support forums may be particularly appealing for distance-learning students, who have fewer opportunities for face-to-face interaction, than traditional university students. It builds on Blight et al.’s (2015) research, which asked brick-university students what was important to them on Facebook. They said support but particularly from people that they knew in the real world. As my participants were less likely to know each other in the real world, it is clear that support can be gained from online relationships as well as those in real life.

The research has much in common with previous DP/CA research into support forums suggesting that student-led Facebook forums do in part function as support forums. Certain discursive techniques are used to offer support, for example, using corroboration and telling second stories, which was also found in support work into depression (Morrow, 2006), suicide (Wiggins et al., 2016), weight management (Cranwell and Seymour-Smith, 2012), grieving (Varga and Paulus, 2013) and addiction (Mudry and Strong, 2013). This suggests that telling second stories is an effective practice in offering support. Similarly, students in my research positioned themselves as ‘in the same boat’ as the others and this was also seen in Morrow’s (2006) research, demonstrating that using the right metaphor at the right time is an effective way to offer support. This use of idiom corresponds with Versteeg et al. (2018) where participants would use ‘listen to your body’ to support others in their use of medication. My research also demonstrates that shifting identity when offering or asking for support is common as in Lamerichs and te Molder’s (2003) research and positioning oneself as genuine in one’s struggle corroborates with Horne and Wiggins’ (2009) and Flinkfeldt’s (2011), research. Knowing these support strategies can be useful when designing support tools for students.

Unlike previous work into support forums, where initial posters to message board forums must build up their entitlement to ask for help and use stories of extremity, (e.g., Horne and Wiggins, 2009), my research shows joining a student-led Facebook forum can be as simple as pressing a button and such preliminary work does not need to be done. Unlike anonymous larger forums, where justifying reasons for coming to the forum in the first place are paramount, in my research, forum culture means it is assumed everyone understands the function and purpose of that forum. Such shared language use and understanding builds a community of support, which is different to that offered on formal university teaching forums. There is also a greater sense of urgency in the fast-paced relay chat of Facebook, unlike message board forums. This urgency is reflected in the dramatic nature of some posts, where students post short catastrophic announcements which demand an urgent
response (see Rhona’s announcement about a mistake in her assignment in section 4.11.1). The familiarisation and purpose of these Facebook forums offers a bridge for successful support when it cannot be done face-to-face.

7.2.3 Accountability

My research demonstrates when students offer help to others, they need to manage that help as they are accountable for it. If they offer too much help and break university rules, this may lead to trouble. Students use identity to manage accountability. For example, when offering help, they orient to a ‘helper’ identity in chapter 5. Part of being a helper is to be cautious in offering that help, so a student may ‘teach’ others rather than simply offer them the answers and/or use hedging to prevent accusations of offering the wrong information (see 5.2.2 when help is offered using ‘I’m sure it has been said’). While Lester and Paulus (2011) demonstrated students used techniques such as corroborating with others to account for knowledge and such strategies were also seen in this data, module materials were also used as a corroborative basis to offer help.

My research also demonstrated students need to account for why they are asking for help, support or advice. Students need to manage asking for help but not appear incompetent at the same time. They do this by blaming materials and tutors, such as when Lizzy blames the module for her lack of enjoyment in her studies (see section 6.4.4). This means, like Flinkfeldt’s (2011) participants who constructed themselves as not to blame for being on sick leave, students position themselves as not at fault for their problems. Furthermore, Stokoe et al. (2013) showed how good results and less-than-average results were accountable matters. My research backs up and builds on this, by showing that students manage good results by being ‘ordinary students’ or ‘jokers’ and bad results by catastrophising or blaming life circumstances.

In addition, my research has demonstrated how emoji can be used as a discursive resource in its own right to account for the unexpected such as fantasy (see 5.4.4 where the students are discussing their escape to a fantasy island to avoid their EMA writing) and avoid being taken seriously. Previous research into ‘haha’ and ‘lol’ has been limited (e.g., Ong’onda et al. 2013) and has mainly been about classifying the use of laughter particles. As an important and extensive emerging affordance of communication and area of research, it has been worthwhile to do some initial analysis into this.
Accountability was also apparent in the complaints chapter, where students had to account for raising a complaint (although not always) and account for who or what was to blame for that complaint. Complaints were also sometimes delicate matters that needed handling carefully. This is where the review turns to next.

7.2.4 Complaining

Researching student use of Facebook is important, as some research suggests poor academic results are correlated with Facebook use (Hewitt, 2004) and that those who do not achieve high marks post more negative updates than those who do (Michikyan et al., 2015). It was not the purpose of my research to investigate this, but what it did do is look at how negative discourse around complaining is used on Facebook by students. It was interesting that the structure of complaints was similar to letters and helplines. Like previous research, announcements (Drew, 1998), were a popular way to open complaints (see section 6.3). When establishing complaints, descriptive detailing, like Al-Momani’s (2014) to student’s complaint letters was a pattern. This was also apparent in Drew’s (1998) study into complaints on helplines. Complaints utilised ECFs (Pomerantz, 1986), emotion discourse (Edwards, 1997), alignment (Drew and Walker, 2009), emphasis and contrast (Weatherall and Stubbe, 2015). When complaints do end, they also share similarities with previous research by using idiom (Drew and Holt, 1988). However, unlike Drew and Walker’s (2009) research into spoken complaints and Holt’s (2012) research into laughter in complaints, complaints in this forum are not always are clearly bounded (although sometimes ‘haha’ and ‘lol’ come at the end of complaint threads, which may suggest some form of boundedness). Sometimes there is no response to a complaint and at other times there is no clear ending. Sometimes, there is no need to build a complaint: sometimes, students will just complain and it will be attended to (often corroborated) by others. This tells us that complaining on social media may have different ‘rules’ than other types of complaints and is therefore an important aspect to understand.

The students also built identities of being reasonable to demonstrate the veracity of their complaint (see 5.3.3 where Sally claims she is reasonable in complaining about her wait for results). This has the function of the student positioning themselves as not at fault. This was also seen in Vasquez’s (2013) research into TripAdvisor, where people would construct themselves as reasonable to avoid accusations of being a complainer (i.e., a ‘moaner’ and ‘whinger’ (Edwards, 2005)).
7.2.5 Affordances

While Garrison et al., (2011) argued that there are problems using talk-related models for internet language, in contrast, DP worked well in investigating how written discourse, emoji and other affordances are used in this Facebook forum. For example, my research shows how self-deprecating humour can be done not only through words and tone, but also via ‘lol’ and ‘haha’. This builds on the research of Ask and Abidin (2018) and develops the research on laughter online. The use of ‘x’ and emoji is frequently drawn on in Facebook forum discourse to mitigate stance, construct selves as ‘reasonable’ and avoid offending readers or save face. My research sits firmly on the ‘emoji as action’ side of emoji research, which claims we use emoji for purpose, developing research by Vandergriff, (2013), who recognised that emoji use has a function.

7.2.6 Overall

The combination of using DP, student instigated Facebook forums and distance-learning students is a unique contribution to the fields of education and psychology. Overall, my research explores student participation in Facebook forums at a further level of analysis. Instead of aiming to reveal what students’ purpose of being in forums is — to procrastinate (Deng and Tavares, 2013), find out about each other, communicate generally and manage social lives, this research has shown how they discursively do these as practices. Rather than examine what students are resentful towards, like Hughes (2010) this research reveals how students use discourses of resentment/ anxiety, but also position themselves as reasonable to convince others of their right to complain. Emotion (both in words and in terms of emoji) is not treated as something that is driving people to post, but as something that is used to convince others of righteous positions in complaining or asking for support.

There are clear similarities and differences with previous research, as outlined above, which in one way suggests my research is robust and in extension explicates the complexities involved in doing support work in a Facebook forum, which had not been explored in as much detail as it has been here. Although it is important to be mindful that this research is particular to this forum and informs understanding of how to support a large cohort of students, in excess of 6000 per year, at the OU, it is also possible such discursive work is similar to that being undertaken in other student forums across the university, the UK and indeed the world. Therefore, the research can offer students and universities more awareness of how these forums function. By extension, further education colleges and even secondary schools may be interested in these findings.
7.3  Strengths and Limitations

7.3.1  Theoretical strengths and limitations

This research has gained an in-depth understanding of the nuances of active student communication on Facebook. It has shown how students construct identities and account for their learning and that this can be successfully explored by DP. We have seen that students draw on particular identities to offer and be offered support as well as complain.

DP is sometimes accused of being limited in sample size. However, this misses the point. The purpose of the research is to look for language constructions and not generalisations in a statistical sense. In this particular forum, a small ‘sample’ size has provided us with information we can use to understand how students are using Facebook for support work.

My research is innovative in that it demonstrates the complexities that emerge when working through what it means to be a distance-learning student on Facebook in this particular forum, at this particular time. So, to struggle, may also mean to joke, be constructed as frustrated, as a procrastinator, a panicker, as confused and as an obsessive. We now know that these are the ways some students ask for peer support. We can also see that some students are generous in offering such support as they sympathise, encourage, corroborate and fantasise. We can also see how the production of a complaint may not always be about solving the complaint.

Using DP to analyse internet discourse could have been challenging, as DP was not developed to analyse internet talk. However, I found that DP was a worthwhile and helpful approach for my research. It illuminated that discursive psychology can be applied to asynchronous online talk successfully. The perspective and method chosen was appropriate for the purpose of the study.

7.3.2  Methodological strengths and limitations

A key strength of my research was the natural nature of the data. There was no researcher interference, so students could not respond to demand characteristics and behave in the way they expected the researcher wanted them to. Another strength of using this ‘space’, is that it has similarities to previous (or present-day) ‘spaces’ in ‘real’ life where students get together to discuss
their courses without the presence of tutors. We now have access to students discussing their 
university lives socially, which researchers had more limited access to in the days before the internet. 
It would not have been as easy to record students speaking in a pub or café, for example, to conduct 
a discursive analysis on their chat. However, it should be considered that the ‘real’ world and ‘online’ 
environments are not the same (although they can overlap) and they offer different affordances.

Another key strength was gaining an insight into distance-learning students. Most research of a 
similar nature has been done on brick-university students, so this research means some carefully 
considered similarities and differences between the two can be drawn (see the literature discussion). 
It has also led to many suggestions for further research (see section 7.7) and implications for 
educational practice and academic theory (see section 7.6).

In terms of the practicalities of gathering the data, there are several changes I would make to 
increase efficiency if I was to do the study again. In order to download the data initially, I used 
keywords on the Facebook page because I needed to categorise a large amount of data and wanted 
to keep it manageable. Because I used keywords, I ended up with a lot of overlap and there did not 
seem to be any systematic organisation to the data. In fact, eventually I re-ordered the threads in 
date order, on paper. If I had downloaded by date in the first place, it would have saved a lot of time 
and avoided the overlap problem. If the forum had had more participants, the keyword method may 
have been a more effective technique though.

The keywords I used did not always come up with what I expected. For example, ‘leaving’ also gave 
me all the posts with ‘going’ in them — so the posts were not always in context. If I searched with 
too restrictive terms (i.e., ‘leaving the module’) I missed relevant posts, so I had to broaden the terms 
which meant results were less specific.

Data scraping is time-consuming. Once the results from the keyword search are completed, you need 
to go through all the data and expand the comments as well as the ‘see mores’ for long posts. This 
can be problematic because you may miss some due to human error. This did happen to me, but I did 
manage to retrieve the posts at a later date from Facebook. However, online data is precarious and 
may disappear at any moment. One way round this could be to double-check all threads are correctly 
opened before capturing and downloading.
NVivo was useful for finding information in my data set. It was useful for copying and pasting screenshots into my final write-up and for general observations in what was happening in the data. It was useful for finding instances of things, like metaphors. However, I did not find it useful for the fine detailed analysis that DP requires, so I had to print out the data and analyse on paper. I certainly did not see NVivo as a shortcut and in fact, it was possibly more of a hindrance in some ways. I wonder, if on reflection, making a big word file of screenshots may have worked better for this project, although then I would forgo the search function which was helpful.

I took data examples to a discourse analysis group (Scottish ethnomethodology, discourse, interaction and talk group) where similar constructions arose during analysis suggesting my analysis is robust. In further support of this, members of the forum offer support when it is requested and others acknowledge when members blame and complain (next-turn proof procedure). Furthermore, the results from the pilot were very similar to the actual study. This also suggests that there may be patterns across similar forums. I also presented my research at an international conference (International Pragmatics Conference, 2017) on emoji and designed a poster on my whole study for staff development days at the OU. These activities helped develop my research as I answered questions and considered some of the possible critiques of my research.

7.4 Ethics

I learned many ethical lessons as a result of my research. I am pleased I managed to overcome some ethical problems and produce solid, ethically appropriate research as a result (see section 3.5). My research showed me that ethical problems can be resolved with patience and discussion with ethics experts.

Participants who were quoted gave either passive or active permission and posts were anonymised. It could be argued that in terms of passive consent, just because people had seen my message in the forum, does not mean they necessarily read it and this was one concern I thought about. However, this is not something that can be controlled for and it was deemed reasonable by the ethics committee.
My research has also highlighted concerns with online research and ethics as a whole. It is an area that is constantly changing as the research and our social world develops. The Cambridge Analytica scandal, (Schneble et al., 2018) for example, has given us more awareness of how our data is used and processed from platforms like Facebook and this could lead to further difficulties in justifying using posts for data analysis in the future. This suggests having clearer rules in terms of ethical research is something we should be working towards. This problem of data privacy is further compounded by discussions around how ‘public’ a private or secret Facebook forum is. There is an argument that no matter how ‘private’ an online group may be, people have no control over who else can see their posts if they are admitted to a forum, therefore the nature of Facebook is public (anyone can join at any time). The division between public and private becomes blurred.

Online research is a growing and developing aspect of academic life and how to ethically research it is constantly changing. It is a great strength of my research that I have grappled with some of the issues around this and I am pleased to report that I am now on the ethics team for advising students on one of our modules at the OU. I refer and draw on my own experience in this research frequently in this role. It is one of the most rewarding parts of my job.

7.5 Personal reflexivity

As the researcher is never separate from the research, it is important to reflect on how my experiences and history may have impacted on the study, as well as the impact the study may have had on me. When I was an undergraduate student, both at a brick-university and at the OU, I remember hearing reasons for not doing well in assessments and indeed, blamed others for my own lack of success at times. I believe studying and achieving, or not so, creates a system where it is useful and pressure-relieving to blame university systems and tutors. It is possible I was interested in how others use blame to account for performance and was looking for this in the data because of my experiences and that I may have missed other important points.

I now also see things from the tutor’s perspective, having been a teacher since 1997 and an AL since 2008. During the research process, I was irritated that students would blame tutors for marks, when I know we have strict marking guidelines as well as monitoring of assessments, appeals systems and exam boards to make sure students are treated as fairly as possible. I was also annoyed because I am very passionate about the institution I work for. I had a very positive experience as a student at the
OU and they employed me when I was at a very difficult juncture in my life, giving me hope. I tried to avoid this irritation coming across in the analysis by focussing on the discourse and understanding that situations are very complex.

During this thesis, the OU was in the process of huge changes and although this data was gathered before the majority of these changes came into place, it is possible my analysis was shaped by the wider political and social contexts at the university. I know the university is interested in retention, for example, so this may be why I focused on complaining behaviour and how students ask for support. If they are not getting enough support, they may be more likely to leave their course. Everything is so situated in time and space and nothing stays still for long.

The process of the EdD has taught me about the benefits and problems in undertaking a project of this scope. Firstly, it has been very rewarding. The EdD has helped me also overcome my own academic anxieties and taught me that much of academic success is down to hard work, effective time-management and dedication. Luckily these have always been skills I have possessed. I have realised how to make these work more effectively for me, however. In the past, I worried a lot about my academic work. Undertaking an EdD, part-time, with a child and full-time work has made me exceptionally focused and my concentration has improved dramatically. There is no time to worry, so my stress levels have dropped.

The experience has also led me to have a more insightful relationship with my students. I appreciate the complexities and difficulties of being a distance-learning student in more depth as I have done it too, twice. Some of the students in this forum genuinely impressed me in their abilities to study and remain motivated when they were dealing with quite diverse and difficult situations.

Something that really struck me about my research was at the start of the process, the posters were posters in a forum, but by the end they became people. I found this interesting from an ethical perspective and it reminded me of the importance of treating research participants with respect.

Something else that surprised me was the extent of complaining I encountered, and again, this may be due to my positive experiences with the OU. I was surprised at the lack of academic discussion and that the complaints were more based on the mundane issues of TMAs, like word-counts and turnaround times. It has made me question emails I receive from students on issues like these and
whether or not they are responding to ‘Facebook hype’. I hope it has meant I can deal with these issues more sensitively.

The research has also highlighted the usefulness of Facebook for some students. Here, they can let off steam and gain support from others who are ‘in the same boat’. Being part of the EdD Facebook group, set up by my own doctoral group means I have been part of similar discourse. I have been able to mostly distance myself from it because I am aware of how Facebook can create chaos and I find if I look at it too much I start to panic. However, I can see other students have reported that it has been useful for them and they value the support. I have also become more aware of the blame tutors put on students in my own module-related tutor forums. This has made me particularly appreciative of my own supervisors and their relationship with me in this process (and journey) and I have not ‘blamed’ them for my own shortcomings and limitations in this research and tried to use their feedback to improve this final piece of work. It helped that I was provided with very supportive supervisors.

I have also learned that research practicalities can take you by surprise. For example, because the pilot went so smoothly, I did not expect I would be blocked from my choice of forum for the main study. I also assumed that the students would not mind me using their quotes for data, especially given they were xxxx. I now realise this was a foolish assumption to make.

A final surprise for me was the amount of work I could still do with this research (see section 7.7) and all the implications it has (7.6), as I discuss next. This richness has increased my enjoyment of the whole process and made me realise research cannot ever end.

7.6 Implications and Applications

The implications and applications of the research can be split into those for my own practice, for students, members of staff at the OU and finally for HE and education as a whole.

76 Text redacted: see appendix 5.
7.6.1 Implications for my own practice

Empirically, there are things I can do which can bring about a better experience for students, for example, be kinder and accept complexities. Using discursive psychology has helped me in avoiding making naive assumptions that what students say is what they mean and instead focussing on what they are orienting to as important. I hope the research has made me more empathetic, but also more resilient. I have realised that student problems are rarely just a personal issue between students and tutors, but there are a multitude of factors going on and these factors are used in discursive battle. In years past, I have been occasionally upset by unfair student feedback. I feel better equipped to manage such problems now.

My research also suggests a balance needs to be gained between giving students too much information and allowing them space to develop their own academic identities. Through my research, it is apparent students say they struggle with lack of information or results, for example. I already do such address concerns for my students (I tell them how much support is appropriate, when to expect their TMAs back and deal with their problems in a timely manner) and have found this reduces ‘panicky’ emails, although I have no idea what they are saying about me on Facebook. I could be more proactive with contacting my students sometimes rather than waiting for them to contact me and am hopeful, if I do this, I may further alleviate concerns.

7.6.2 Implications and applications for the Open University
7.6.2.1 Implications and applications for students

This research has examined how students interact in a Facebook forum in relation to their studies. Offering students awareness of this could help them understand their own interaction in forums, to recognise different patterns and how to develop strategies to respond to discussion threads. It would be ideal to use CARM-Text (Stokoe, 2014) workshops. Workshops could be arranged using the above materials. Different threads would be chosen from each of the three analysis chapters demonstrating how support/ help/ advice is offered and how complaints are managed. Students would be shown the starts of threads and then be asked to think about what strategies may be used when asking for or offering support, help and advice, and then be shown the rest of the thread. They could then evaluate these in relation to their own responses at the workshop. If they struggled to come up with examples, they would be able to learn how to use alternative strategies in their own forum participation by seeing the examples. A similar example could be done with a complaint thread,
which would demonstrate how students alleviate and escalate complaints. The workshops could be adapted into an online student tool, so students who could not come to a face-to-face workshop would also be able to participate. The online tool would follow the same process as the workshop, where students would be encouraged to read threads, think about how they would respond to it and then the thread would be revealed. They could then evaluate this in relation to their responses.

There is an argument that staff should not interfere in student activity out with the formal university environment (Gettman and Cortijo, 2015). It would be important to explain to students that this workshop or online tool would not be advising against using Facebook, but just making students aware of what is going on so they can make informed decisions. It would be important to make it clear that the university is not interfering in such spaces, just as it would not in a student ‘canteen’ but is raising awareness of discursive practices. Hopefully, this could help students make informed judgements about what they see on Facebook and distance themselves from unhelpful ‘hype’ and possible ‘pooled ignorance’.

Workshops could also be used to train peer mentors for peer-to-peer support. The same process could be used as outlined above, and peers could use this awareness when supporting students who may wish to discuss their social media usage.

7.6.2.2 Implications for tutors and academic staff

Another way this research could be used is to inform tutors of how some students are constructing themselves and the University on Facebook. A similar workshop to the above would be held with tutors. This would demonstrate to tutors that how students interact on such forums. This would be an ideal activity for a staff development course. This could also help tutors in moderating module-related forums as similar strategies may appear (although it is important to note that this has not been researched yet).

7.6.2.3 Implications beyond the Open University and educational practice more generally

Even though The Open University is a different learning experience than brick universities in that it is online, distance learning and usually with mature students, more and more brick universities are using online platforms to deliver courses or to complement their face-to-face teaching. Social media is ubiquitous in education. Therefore, this research is not only important for Open University
students and staff, but is also important for HE, FE and educational practice as a whole. Students do use social media, no matter where they study. Therefore, the workshops outlined above would also be useful for other universities too.

One of the important findings of this research is in demonstrating how students open up spaces of disempowerment, which can then be taken up and occupied by others. This is important as these spaces appear to be unhelpful positions for students. For example, when students blame others for not getting desired marks this creates a norm where it is acceptable practice to complain about marks on the forum, rather than identifying practical means to improvement. It is also concerning that some students construct themselves as ‘lucky’ when getting good marks and incompetent when getting poorer marks, which demonstrates the complexities in managing marks awarded. Another available construction is that of ‘giving up’. Students who positioned themselves as struggling drew on ‘giving up’ as a solution to their academic problems. This again opens up a disempowered position, where others may also take this up and occupy this available space. These constructions are concerning and may be of interest to other educational institutions.

7.7 Further research

Researching Facebook is important, because social media is now such an ingrained part of society (we can see this in the prevalence of using internet ‘talk’, such as ‘lol’ over ‘haha’ and emoji). It is unrealistic to expect some students are not using it while studying or for studying. Reasons for students’ desire to keep up with Facebook may be partly because there is an ongoing story that entices students in (Page, 2012) and you never know when your phone will alert you to the next piece of drama, tempting you to ‘check’. Therefore, we have a duty to find ways to work with the phenomenon to the best of our abilities, rather than suggesting students avoid it in relation to studying.

My research is not complete. The first way I would like to extend my research would be to run my idea for the workshops and assess if they help students in their use of social media. Secondly, focusing on individual students, to examine how they position themselves over time in the forum could be interesting. More work into the use of emoji, looking at where the emoji appears and what purposes are being achieved would develop this aspect of my research.
In terms of wider discursive research, I would like to compare module-related forums with Facebook ones. Researching the two platforms in more depth could lead to a better understanding of the differences and similarities between the two. Two forums — one from Moodle and one from Facebook — from the same cohort and module, using the same method as was used in this research, could illuminate what the similarities and differences are in identity performance between them. There may also be opportunities for further work here around how support differs between different types of student as well (e.g., brick vs distance-learning).

It would also be useful to discursively analyse different education-related forums: Facebook forums at a different level of study (say Honours or Masters students) may demonstrate differences with more experienced students. Speculatively, it could be assumed that the more students have been studying, the less support they require, so forum ‘culture’ may change. Investigating a tutor forum at the OU, from a discursive perspective to see how tutors position students and how they blame and complain could reveal more on the tensions between students and tutors as well as the positives.

A further discursive study could be around tutor feedback on TMAs and how students respond to this. This could lead to another workshop, where staff could be shown examples of how to construct discursively positive, feed-forward feedback. This may help mitigate against negative feedback putting students off engaging in the future.

I would like to write some papers for educational and social psychological journals and professional publications at the OU, outlining some of the results of this study. Now I have completed the EdD I should be able to find some time to do this. I would use quotes from students who had given explicit permission in my papers. Each analysis chapter could be a paper. The different discursive identities would fit well into social psychological journals on discourse and identity. I would also like to write some papers on the ethics of online research and the obstacles I have overcome in this thesis.

7.8  Conclusion

This innovative research also tells us, from a discursive perspective, what it means to be a student in a Facebook forum in the xxxx77 decade in the 21st century. These participants are working through emergent contemporary, OU student identities. Such identities involve being part of a group and

77 Redacted text: see appendix 5
remaining so, by asking appropriately for support, offering it when required and complaining. Having somewhere to go for support, when you cannot meet other students face-to-face must have its value, in that students have somewhere to interact with others who are ‘in the same boat’.

My main message from this research is that we can do something to improve the student experience in relation to social media. Students will always be students and they will always ask for and offer support, help and advice as well as complain. However, what has changed is our understanding of these discursive practices. Now we need to apply and disseminate this knowledge, via the workshops outlined above, in order to improve student understanding of how such forums function.

7.9 Recommendations

- Run workshops for students to raise awareness of Facebook forum strategies and help them assess their own contributions to social media.
- Write a tool for students, in the form of an activity of a CARM-Text workshop that can be done at home.
- Run CARM-Text workshops at staff development events to raise awareness of Facebook forum interaction, with a view to running these in other institutions.
8 References


9 Appendix 1
Message for students (posted in the forum)

Dear Facebook participants,
I am a doctoral student and tutor for the OU. I am interested in finding out how xxx\textsuperscript{78} students use Facebook forums and in particular, the ways they express their identities as learners. I have chosen your forum for my research because it is interactive and provides rich data for analysis. The aim of my research is to find ways to help the University improve the student experience. Your participation would be potentially beneficial for students in the future.

All names and identifying features of your posts, including the name of the forum group, will be made anonymous and every effort will be made to ensure no harm will come to you as a result of the research. I will be quoting directly in my research, but as a member of a closed forum group, any direct quotes from your postings would not be found in a general Internet search. Future or past tutors would not know that you have made these comments and neither would other students, apart from those in your closed group who will already have had access to them. Data will be treated securely. I will download the forum onto my computer, which is password protected and data will be deleted once the research is completed (\textsuperscript{79}). It is hoped the research will be published at a later date so any direct quotes could appear in publication. You can request to see the results of the data in \textsuperscript{80}, when the research is complete, by emailing myself.

Ethical safeguards
The research will adhere to the standard BERA (British Educational Research Association) and BPS (British Psychological Society) guidelines. Links to the guidelines can be found below.
https://www.bera.ac.uk/.../ethical-guidelines-for-educational...
http://www.bps.org.uk/.../ethics-standards/ethics-standards

None of you will have been a student of mine for \textsuperscript{81}, and it is unlikely you will ever be. However if you are currently a student of mine, your comments will not be used for this study. If you do not wish to be part of this study, please email \textsuperscript{82}. Your contribution is entirely voluntary and you do not have to give a reason not to take part.

Thank you.

\textsuperscript{78} Redacted text: see appendix 5.
\textsuperscript{79} Redacted text: see appendix 5.
\textsuperscript{80} Redacted text: see appendix 5.
\textsuperscript{81} Name of module redacted.
\textsuperscript{82} Email address and date redacted.
10 Appendix 2
Message for students who did not see the forum message for consent.

Dear (student name)

I am a doctoral student and tutor for the OU. I am interested in finding out how xxxx\textsuperscript{83} students use Facebook forums and in particular, the ways they express their identities as learners. I would like to use a forum you have participated in (name of forum) because it is interactive and provides rich data for analysis. I posted a consent message in the forum but notice you have not read it/ have left the forum (delete as appropriate), so the purpose of this message is to request your consent for taking part in the study.

The aim of my research is to find ways to help the University improve the student experience. Your participation would be potentially beneficial for students in the future.

All names and identifying features of your posts, including the name of the forum group, will be made anonymous and every effort will be made to ensure no harm will come to you as a result of the research. I will be quoting directly in my research, but as a member of a closed forum group, any direct quotes from your postings would not be found in a general Internet search. Future or past tutors would not know that you have made these comments and neither would other students, apart from those in your closed group who will already have had access to them. Data will be treated securely. I will download posts from the forum onto my computer, which is password protected and data will be deleted once the research is completed. It is hoped the research will be published at a later date so any direct quotes could appear in publication, but will be anonymous.

Ethical safeguards

The research will adhere to the standard BERA (British Educational Research Association) and BPS (British Psychological Society) guidelines. Links to the guidelines can be found below.

https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2011
http://www.bps.org.uk/what-we-do/ethics-standards/ethics-standards

If you would like further information please email\textsuperscript{84}. You may also contact my supervisor\textsuperscript{85}.

Please could you respond to this message confirming whether you give your consent to take part or not. Your contribution is entirely voluntary and you do not have to give a reason not to take part. I

\textsuperscript{83} Redacted text: see appendix 5.
\textsuperscript{84} Email address redacted
\textsuperscript{85} Email address redacted
have included a ‘copy and paste’ statement below. All you need to do is copy and paste the statement with the appropriate response and send the message to me by replying to this one. I (name of student) consent/ do not consent to take part in a study on Facebook interaction by Judith Horne.
Thank you.
Judith Horne
### 11 Appendix 3
Table 4: Table of techniques for discursive analysis (in alphabetical order)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique and reference</th>
<th>Description (generic explanation)</th>
<th>Example from my research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affect display</td>
<td>An affect display is a display of emotion. In discursive analysis, it is analysed as an accomplishment of discourse and performative and not as an underlying emotion.</td>
<td>‘lol’ or emoji (😊) (see section 4.9.2).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category entitlements</td>
<td>This is a device used to persuade others that people are correct in their stance, because they belong to a particular category.</td>
<td>A student convinces others they are knowledgeable enough to offer ‘correct’ responses to a TMA. The category here is ‘knowledgeable student’ (see section 5.2.1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensus and corroboration</td>
<td>Corroboration is when someone backs up another's assessment. ‘Consensus’ is when others agree with prior assessments. Both work to convince other listeners/ writers of the factualness of the report.</td>
<td>Students in this research often positioned themselves as ‘in the same boat’ as others (see section 5.4.2.1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviant case analysis</td>
<td>Deviant cases are examples of rhetoric that do not follow a standard pattern of response that has been uncovered by other analyses. Analysis of deviant cases draws out more complex layers of discourse using the variability to enrich understanding of normative (non-deviant) cases. An example comes from Heritage (1995). Interviewers on television are normally treated as neutral in terms of their views. But, discursive ‘trouble’ arises when those being interviewed treat the interviewer as having a personal stance. (Heritage &amp; Greatbatch, 1991; Potter, 1996b, cited in Potter, 1998).</td>
<td>In section 5.5, there is an example of a deviant case, where the student does not follow the standard pattern of response to a request for help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclaimer</td>
<td>A disclaimer is a device which works to prevent someone being accused of something they might be because of their following discourse. May include the formulation ‘I might be x, but...’</td>
<td>In section 5.3.3, a poster constructs herself as reasonable, but using the disclaimer ‘Fair enough, they are busy but...’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Downgrading/ minimising**  
(Wiggins, 2017) | Downgrading and minimising happens when people modify their discourse so the situation is constructed as less extreme. | In section 4.7, Penny downgrades a panic over completing her EMA after receiving advice from another participant. |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Extreme case formulations**  
(Pomerantz, 1986) | This refers to the use of an extreme example to persuade. We may say ‘everyone knows that’ when really, not everyone does. | In section 4.5.1, Sylvia uses the ECF of ‘any sense’ to convince others of her identity as genuinely struggling. |
| **Factual information**  
(Edwards and Potter, 1992) | DP analyses the rhetorical action involved in offering factual information and is agnostic to the veracity of that information. What is important is the information that is attended to as factual by the speaker/writer. | In section 4.5.2, Rhona attends to information in the TMA guidance as ‘factual’ and uses this to support Celia. |
| **Hedging**  
(Wiggins, 2017) | This is hesitantly or carefully constructing something to avoid discourse being taken up in a dispreferred way. A student may say ‘I might be wrong, however...’ | In section 5.2.2, Rebecca uses hedging with ‘I’m sure it’s been said’ to mitigate against being accused of offering incorrect information. |
| **Idiom**  
(Edwards and Potter, 1992, p.114) | An idiom is a ‘ cliched or proverbial expression’ (Edwards and Potter, 1992, p.114). | ‘all in the same boat’ appears throughout the data and works to position the students as all in the module together. |
| **Lists and contrasts**  
(Edwards and Potter, 1992) | Although these can be used in many different ways, lists are usually three-part lists and can work to emphasise information and strengthen argument. These are very pervasive in speech and writing. Contrasts can be used to strengthen argument. | In section 4.6, Penny uses the three-part list ‘frustrated and stressed and blah!’ which works to convince others of her stress levels. In section 6.4.5, the students contrast good and bad tutors to enhance the veracity of their accounts. |
| **Narrative**  
(Edwards and Potter, 1992) and second stories  
(Wiggins et al., 2016) | Story-telling is used for purpose. We construct stories to persuade and convince. The ‘truth’ of the story is not important, in DP, but how we use narrative to convince others is. Second stories are stories that are told in response to first stories. | In section 5.4.1, the students use different stories to convince others of their difficulties relating to their studies. It is important to note that second stories are often... |
<p>| <strong>Pre-announcement (Edwards, 2012)</strong> | A pre-announcement is where a poster posts something vague before revealing the main point of the post. It is usually used to build tension. It may be along the lines of ‘you’ll never guess what...’ An example from Edwards’ work is when ‘Lesley’ says: Lesley: Oh: y- you know I-I- I’m broiling about something’ (Edwards, 2012, p.429). And then goes on to discuss that happened at a vicarage jumble sale. | In section 4.11.1, Rhona opens up her post with a pre-announcement, which works to draw in her readers and build suspense. |
| <strong>Positioning (Wetherell, 1998)</strong> | Positioning is the various ways people present themselves and others in text and talk for purpose. In discourse, positions are ‘available’ for people to use to do things. Positions are multiple and flexible. In Wetherell’s (1998) work into masculine identities, one of the young men takes the positions of ‘innocent’, ‘lucky’ and ‘drunk’ etc in a short fragment of conversation. | In chapter 4, in seeking support and information, students draw on several different positions to build identity including struggling, anxious desperate, and panicking. |
| <strong>Repair (Meredith and Stokoe, 2014)</strong> | When information is changed after making an error (self-initiated repair). | In section 4.9.2, Sophie repairs her offering of incorrect information earlier in the thread. |
| <strong>Reported speech (Wiggins, 2017)</strong> | Reported speech is when people claim others have said things to them. They may quote directly. |  |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stake inoculation (Potter, 1996)</td>
<td>This is when discourse pre-empts accusations of bias and / or others’ motivations. The discourse works to avoid accusations before others accuse them. In Potter's (1996) book, one example is of a newspaper article, where a doctor is constructed as having done a lot of research into finding out that there is a link between creativity and psychiatric problems. This means that it is less likely he will be accused of being wrong because the facts are presented as having been researched.</td>
<td>In section 6.4.4, Julie uses stake inoculation to avoid being accused of being a show-off.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systematic Vagueness (Edwards and Potter, 1992)</td>
<td>People may be deliberately vague which saves face and avoid accusation. This prevents a rebuttal because there is not enough ‘meat’ to draw on in the discourse to argue against. Attenborough (2011) shows how being vague helps students avoid being seen as too academic.</td>
<td>In section 5.3.2, Eva is offering Penny advice on her TMA but she is vague, which means she cannot be challenged on her information giving if it is inaccurate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upgrading (Pomerantz, 1984)</td>
<td>When a speaker or writer makes a second assessment which is upgraded from before, as something ‘more extreme’ than the initial post. For example, J: it’s a beautiful day out isn’t it? L Yeh it’s just gorgeous. . . The use of ‘gorgeous’ upgrades the state of the day to something more than beautiful (Pomerantz, 1984, cited in Potter, 1998, p.248).</td>
<td>In section 6.4.4, the students are discussing how long they have been waiting for marks and upgrade their situations as worse than the people before them in the thread.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivid description (Edwards and Potter, 1992)</td>
<td>Lots of detail can construct people as ‘knowledgeable’ in what they are talking about and make their stance difficult to contest. In Edwards and Potter (1996), there is the example of how establishing being a witness to something involves offering description that is vivid.</td>
<td>In section 6.4.1, it is shown that when complaining, descriptive detail is used to convince.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
12 Appendix 4
Additional laughter/ emoji descriptives

The table below tells us that in this particular forum 'lol' was used more often than 'haha'. Towards the end of the forum there were more 'lols' and 'hahas' overall.

Table 5: Breakdown of 'hahas' and 'lols' month by month

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>'hahas' counted</th>
<th>'lols' counted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Coding of ‘hahas’and ‘lols’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>use</th>
<th>Incidents (haha)</th>
<th>Incidents (lol)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laughing at self</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corroboration/ sharing the joke</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7: Emoji and other affordances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Like/emoji</th>
<th>Instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>like</td>
<td>1896</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>smile</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xx</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frowning/ angry</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laugh (with or without tongue/ with or without tears)</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wink (with or without tongue out)</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad and/ or crying</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>horror</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheeky with or without monkey</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>serious</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shock/ surprise</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>embarrassed</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>confused</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearts</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sweating</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress/ exhaustion/ despair</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party poppers</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclamation mark</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drinks</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running backwards</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meh</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kiss</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong arm</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>book</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flowers</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>angel</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prayer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drama</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fiesta</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-leaf clover</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hands in the air</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>fireworks</td>
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<tr>
<td>cool</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No face/ just eyes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Redactions have been made before posting this thesis to ORO to further protect participants’ identities, after discussion with the Open University’s Human Research Ethics Committee.