

Interacting with online learners: How new elaborations of online presence can foster critical thinking and reflection

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The growth of online teaching and learning environments within higher education has effectively established this delivery model as integral to face to face, flexible or distance delivery across the majority of disciplines. A common component of these environments is the discussion forum, typically operating asynchronously and designed to establish a collaborative networked learning environment to foster communities of practice and inquiry. However, based on our online experiences, the best practice frameworks aligned to these environments do not always address the complexity of interactions within the online dynamic. To examine the reason for this discrepancy, we are examining one of the key factors relevant to the creation and maintenance of online communities and networks, which is the presence exhibited by both teachers and learners. Using a combination of existing theoretical frameworks, asynchronous discussion data and personal experiences as teachers, learners and professional developers, we present a classification framework based on multiple student perspectives for different learner roles by which teachers and learners can maximise the effectiveness of interactions within online teaching and learning environments.

Keywords: online, discussion, interaction, learner role

Introduction

As more and more students, especially those in mid-career, are seeking higher education, and utilising the expediency of the 'any time any place' delivery model offered by the majority of providers (Perkinson, 2004), the dynamic of the online learner/online teacher interaction is becoming increasingly significant in terms of the quality of the teaching and learning experience. This is further exacerbated by the number of adjunct or part time teachers who are now being hired by both traditional and 'online universities' to support this increase in student numbers. Consequently the encounters that result and the different ways that teachers and learners manifest their online presence, especially when they are asynchronous, is critical to the success of the teaching and learning experience. Salmon (2003) speaks of this in terms of e-moderating presence, and identifies key activities for the teacher (e.g course expectations and regular communication) and learner (eg active communication with other participants). Nevertheless, our experience also highlights a conflict within online environments, where the expectations of the online participant for regular and frequent support are not necessarily aligned with that of the teachers, who can often emphasise self sufficiency and student collaboration.

One reason cited to explain this potential conflict is that online communication cannot have the richness of a face to face environment; for example, Preece (2000) suggests that it can lack visual signals, logical sequence and emotive cues. However, given the increase in online learning, we believe it imperative to investigate new levels of communication, rather than basing online interactions on an assumption that face to face communication represents the 'best' form of communication and that computer mediated communication is inherently less effective. Our argument therefore is that we must focus on what is and what will be, rather than what was. The 'what is' can be characterised as an emergent social context in which both synchronous and asynchronous communications are the norm – chats and SMS being a prime example. Granted, these communications are often made with the participants knowing one another through prior physical meeting, but the resulting virtual communication is quite 'real'. From one perspective Preece's (2000) admonition to borrow from sociology, communications and social psychology is looking to reinforce new technologies with theories founded in the pre-digital age. We must go beyond that comfort zone and research the teaching and learning environments that will be, interactions and dynamics that we may not feel comfortable with at the moment, but which will be the social milieu for future generations, and therefore students we will potentially meet in the online context.

In this paper we are focusing specifically on those online environments that operate in distance mode, with students geographically dispersed and the primary form of interaction being the discussion forum. This context provides the framework by which to elaborate on existing work relating to dynamics of the online classroom with respect to three common forms of online presence.

The first of these is social presence, “the ability of learners to project their personal characteristics into the community of inquiry, thereby presenting themselves as real people” (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 1999:4). Social presence theory focuses on the extent to which media can successfully convey a sense of the participants being physically present, using face to face communication as the standard (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976), which is supported by Preece (2000:165) who asserts that “social presence, or more practically lack of social presence, can critically influence how people behave online, form impressions of others, and negotiate common ground”. However, as suggested previously, is this the correct standard to apply online and are we wishing to replicate physical presence? To what extent will social presence impact motivation and engagement in online teaching and learning interactions?

A second component is cognitive presence, “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2004:1). In this research extensive consideration was made of discussion interactions that identified cognitive presence descriptors such as deliberation, conception, perception and experience as key to facilitating higher order thinking while acknowledging that further research is necessary to better understand the processes. Thirdly, linking these social and cognitive presence is teaching presence, “the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educational worthwhile learning outcomes” (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer 2001:1).

While implementing strategies to enhance social and cognitive presence in our own online teaching activities, one of the observations we have made is that many learners do not seek collaborative networks and that there is minimal evidence of learners developing or demanding an explicit online social presence. Therefore we have implemented a pilot research study to gain better understanding of the online teaching and learning dynamic and how the complex interactions between teachers and an increasingly diverse student population can be better understood, especially what might be termed the multiple perspectives which those individual learners bring to online courses of study.

These perspectives involve both the educational goals of the learner as well as their level of cognitive development. In terms of goals, the online learners that we have encountered appear to fall into three groups; those who are studying online because it is economically attractive; those for whom it is the most convenient (pragmatic) and those for whom the scholarly interactions and collaborations are of prime importance. To provide a framework for the cognitive development of online learners, we have adopted the levels identified by Perry (1970). The dualistic learner assumes that there is a simple answer to the course topic; the multipilistic learner will recognise that not all answers can be provided while the relativistic learner will determine that answers can be derived from many perspectives. Through our study we will position the outcomes in terms of the dimensions of educational goals (pragmatic, economic, scholarly) and cognitive development (dualistic, multipilistic, relativistic).

Key questions

From our initial analysis, the research on online presence often assumes a ‘typical’ adult student and provides guidelines and suggestions on effective presence for that assumed of the typical student. Similarly the discourse on teaching to “foster self directed learning” appears to assume that students are all at the same starting point when, from the authors’ own experience as both teachers and learners this is not the typical case. Consequently we argue that it is essential to discuss the idea of online presence from multiple student perspectives, and pose the following questions for an examination of the online dynamic between teacher and learner:

1. How can a teacher be present enough (or perceived to be present enough) that students benefit from their subject matter expertise without being so present that she or he does not inhibit the students from learning from one another?

2. Given that students have different educational goals (e.g. pragmatic, economic, scholarly), and assuming that those goals help form students' expectations of teacher presence, is it possible (or desirable) for a teacher to be present (or perceived as present) at different levels for different students?
3. Given that students are at different stages of cognitive development (Perry, 1970) and assuming that those stages help form student expectations of teacher presence, is it possible (or desirable) for a teacher to be present (or be perceived as present) at different stages for different students?

To address these questions, the performance and perceptions of learners within an online course were reviewed from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective. The courses in which the learners were enrolled were offered by Capella University (USA) and all learners were resident in the United States with the teacher resident in Australia. The learners are typically mid-career, having chosen to upgrade their qualifications to either Masters or Doctoral level; with professions across the K-12, Community College, Higher Education, Health, Government, Corporate and Defence sectors.

Presence as a quantitative experience

To provide current data for this analysis, two sets of data were collected. First, the total number of responses made by both the learners and the teacher to contributions made to weekly discussion topics were recorded in order to develop a profile of weekly 'presence' from a quantitative perspective. Figure 1 below represents contributions to an online course over eight weekly units (U1 – U8) and the percentage of the total weekly responses made by the teacher and two of the twelve learners. The data indicates that Learner 1 was not as active (quantitatively) in the course as Learner 2, and did not make any contributions during the Unit 2 discussions. On the other hand, Learner 2 was more prolific in their responses throughout the course. The teacher's responses represent a high contribution in Units 1 and 2 providing support for new learners, with significant input in Unit 4 (prior to an assessment piece being required) and Unit 7 (when learners were completing their final projects).

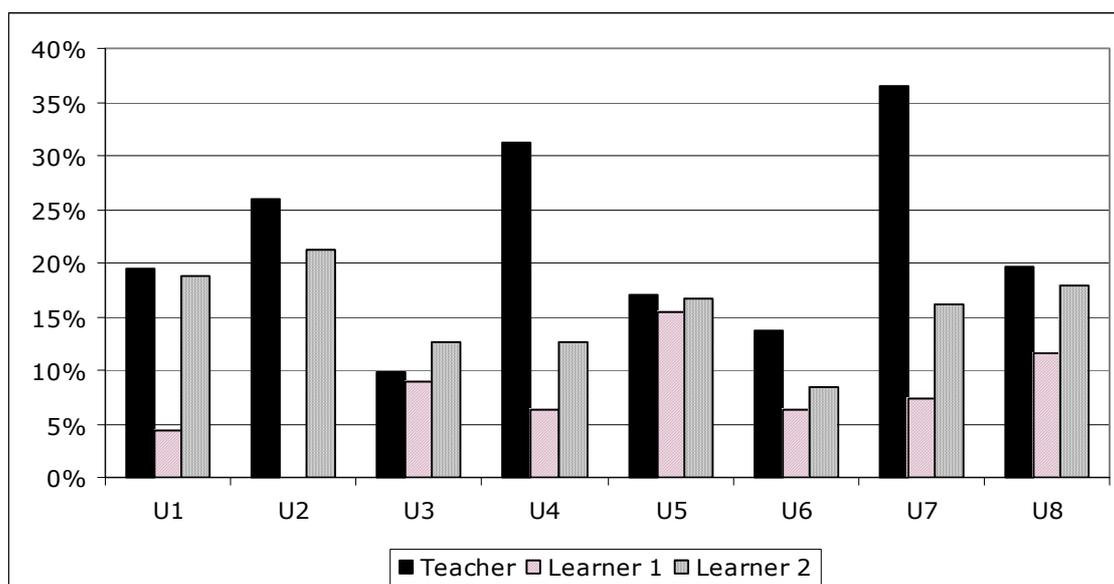


Figure 1: Comparison of Teacher and Learner Contributions

However, while it is possible to imply from this data that the participants (teacher and learner) and comparatively high or low presence within that online learning environment (Garrison et al, 2004; Anderson et al, 2003; Roach et al, 2001) this does not give an indication of the substance or perceived value of those contributions by either teacher or learner. More importantly, despite the teacher in this example contributing approximately 20% of all responses, which might be considered a high presence, feedback from learners indicated that this level of visibility did not necessarily provide the desired presence or level of interaction to meet their individual learning needs.

Given this, a basic question emerges: what does it mean to have presence, or to be effectively present, in an online, distant environment? The following analysis provides an assessment of qualitative responses in terms of the factors emerging and the implications for enhancing both learner and teacher presence in an online, asynchronous environment.

Presence as a qualitative experience

In order to develop a more substantial view of presence therefore, learners from two courses being conducted by the first author were asked to respond to five questions relating to presence in online teaching and learning. In making the request, it was made clear to learners that there was no obligation to make a response, that the response was not a component of the course and that any responses would be confidential. The questions related to what it meant to be present online, to differentiate high and low learner presence as well as high and low teacher (instructor) presence.

Of the 36 learners enrolled, 12 elected to respond to the questions; not all learners responded to each of the five questions. As a qualitative study, the sample of learners is representative of one instance of online teaching and learning interactions. In analysing the data and developing conclusions, there is no assumption that the responses can be generalised to all online teaching and learning environments. However, the implications for perceptions of online presence will be useful for reflection on a range of online educational interactions.

The first question asked was for respondents to indicate their view of online presence, and the classification of their responses are shown in Table 1 following. Of the 11 responses received, the learners focused on indicators such as personal considerations to community and participation to the procedure of completing a course. From a teacher's perspective, while participation and frequency of response are both predictable and observable, it is the personal aspects that a learner can bring to the online environment that can complicate the interaction.

Table 1: Classification of online presence

1. What does it mean for you to be present in an asynchronous online learning environment?				
Personal (n=4) Beliefs Flexibility Recognition	Participation (n=3) Active Reflective Responsive Engaged	Frequency (n=2) Connected Rate	Community (n=1) Being heard	Procedural (n=1) Assessment

What the different perceptions reinforce is our observation of the complexity of individual differences and learning expectations, the multiple perspectives, that learners do indeed present during online interactions. For example, for the learners surveyed, presence is related to the flexibility that the environment provides, exemplified by the comment:

... it provides me the flexibility in my daily schedule to continue my studies without spending another few nights away from my family. I can study at home or in a quiet place at my choosing.

For other learners, the emphasis is on participation and the importance of community to provide the framework for constructive activity – “being present means that I am an active participant in the discussions being held; that I both acknowledge the contributions of my classmates and contribute my own thoughts as well”. However, the activity is also linked to the frequency of participation, and the extent to which the learner is part of the dynamic – “when I am able to logon at minimum every 2 days to participate in the collaborative online discussions and assignments. If I do not keep up this consistent participation, I feel disconnected from the rest of the class”. While these general observations are consistent with the general characteristics of the online learner (e.g. Palloff & Pratt, 2003), there are other examples that require more scrutiny.

With respect to this, one learner conceptualised presence as being manifested through their internal state of mind, which aligns with what Reeves (2004) identifies as the conative domain. In stating that “presence is a proactive state of mind and activity, where one is in a continual process of defining and refining beliefs and attitudes, with the objective to gain critical insights, through collaborative means, to develop specific competencies” the response highlights that how we participate in an online environment is largely through our construction of personal mental models – not only those in the affective domain but also the conative, which aligns with will, determination and motivation. Given this observation, it is pertinent to ask that, as an online teacher, to what extent can an understanding of a learner’s personal belief and motivation help balance the way the online teaching process is conducted? From a different perspective, are there presence factors, pertinent to the learner, that extend beyond those described by social and cognitive presence?

Presence for the learner

In the literature there appears to be a lack of focus of the online learner being an individual and therefore bringing multiple perspectives of their presence to the online (in this instance, asynchronous) environment. In analysing the responses to the second question (summarised in Table 2), which focused on the characteristics of learners with a high online presence, two of the emergent characteristics, Quality and Community, aligned with Cognitive Presence while Frequency was associated with Social Presence.

Table 2: Classification of high online learner presence

2. What characterises learners who, in your opinion, have high Course Room presence?	
Personal (n=3)	Sample Responses
Dedication Commitment Energy	It means a dedication in using time management skills to set aside predetermined blocks of time to devote to completing course assignments, posting prepared in depth discussions and responses, and to find this balance between family, work, and studies to be successful
Quality (n=3)	Sample Response
Provoking Proactive Insightful	* Responses that provoke thought are desirable. * Did I learn something or did it make me think or ask further questions, was it insightful.
Frequency (n=4)	Sample Response
Quantity Grace Timeliness	Learners who respond to direct questions asked of them within 24 hours of the question or comment being posted. They should not wait until the final day or two of the response period to make all their postings. People who post often/frequently.
Community (n=2)	Sample Response
Understanding Dialogue Resources	Feeling, understanding and comprehending the material and having a dialogue with the Facilitator and the other Learners.

The themes related to the Personal theme identified with high Course Room¹ presence reflected on the dedication of the individual learner, which also links to the hypothesis of Reeves (2004) that we must focus on the conative domain (will and determination) to better understand the learner’s perception and performance in the online context.

One of the valuable outcomes of seeking opinions on the online educational environment is the occasional response that captures the essence of the online dynamic. In this case one of the respondents offered the following comment, defining presence as:

... people (who) seem to float through classroom discussions, stopping almost gracefully to comment on other students' thoughts without interrupting their own graceful momentum ... (like) a butterfly stopping briefly here and there while still remaining on course.

¹ The environment provided by Capella University is known as the Course Room, and this terminology was used in the questions to elicit responses from the learners.

What are the characteristics of a learner who might achieve this? How might a teacher perceive this participative activity? What levels of experience and competence might be required to achieve this level of interaction?

In the same way that learners perceive positive online presence as relating to a range of characteristics, a similar differentiation arises when low presence is considered. As detailed in Table 3 following, responses highlight issues such as personal events that interrupt and affect the ability to participate as well as contributions being made solely to satisfy course assessment requirements. This latter point highlights the importance of the design strategy that is implemented; for example, in a number of courses in which we have participated, the strategy has focused on analysis of texts and reporting personal analyses of those texts. Aligned with this is an assessment rubric that often requires both posting of individual responses and responding to other learners' contributions.

This model can result in presence where "one just interacts because he has to for a grade or just talking to fill the silence or impress the teacher with numbers of postings", with the result that neither teacher nor other learners gain from their activity within the online space.

Table 3: Classification of Low Online Learner Presence

3. What characterises learners who, in your opinion, have low Course Room presence?	
Personal (n=5)	Sample Responses
Unbalanced Uninvolved Satisfied	The balance is not there, life all of a sudden starts to get "in the way", and reasons for non attendance become predominantly excuses. Overworked, not committed, possible work/family conflict if the low course room presence spans 3 out of 12 weeks.
Quantity (n=4)	Sample Response
Little substance As required Short	One who just interacts because he has to for a grade or just talking to fill the silence or impress the teacher with numbers of postings. Short answers that don't say much, but this can be misleading because even short answers can say something to the person even if it is just that they can relate is important.
Not Applicable (n=1)	Sample Response
All have presence	I don't believe there are no learners that have low course room presence in my opinion. Every learner makes an effort to do his or her posts and responses. It may be late or last minute but this may be due to any numerous reasons such as jobs, family or personal problems.
Frequency (n=2)	Sample Response
Last Minute	Learners who don't respond to direct questions or comments or wait until the final day of the discussion timetable to respond. They continually post responses late.

Interestingly, one respondent suggested that everyone has a presence, regardless of their contribution or participation. From our observations it is always apparent when a learner shifts from being an active to passive participant, but the recognition and acknowledgement of those who could almost be classified as lurkers is less apparent. From this initial analysis it suggests that learners are aware of the activity of their peers, but there was no reference to learners affecting a class 'community' by presenting with a low presence.

The learners who frequent these courses do not appear to exhibit extensive social presence in that context, that is their feedback in this survey did not identify 'being themselves' as a factor and the general implication that they are working more as individuals than a team also suggests that cognitive presence is more about their own engagement rather than that of a learning community. Consequently we proposed that consideration be made to a fourth manifestation of online presence, that of learner presence which relates to the continuum of characteristics exhibited by the individual within the context of an online distance education course.

Presence for the teacher

From a different perspective the learners were also asked to consider the key aspects of online presence for their instructors. As can be seen from Table 4, the qualities range from understanding the complexity of the instructor's personal life through to expecting a response within 24 hours; some respondents even considered the instructor should respond to every contribution submitted by a learner.

However while the value of carefully considered responses and the provision of additional resources will clearly enhance the online experience (Sims, 2003; Salmon, 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 2001) the variation in expectations of the teacher's presence, and therefore subsequent performance, highlights the difficulty an instructor has in dealing with diverse expectations and learning styles.

Table 4: Classification of high online teacher presence

4. What characterises instructors who, in your opinion, have high Course Room presence?	
Personal (n=5)	Sample Responses
Time Management Commitment Availability	Setting up time aside to become coaches while balancing their own schedules, an instructor in this environment must also be able to respond to student posts usually during the weekends since many are posted during this time frame.
Quantity (n=1)	Sample Response
Over Zealous	Too much comment stifles the courseroom chatter ... too much control drives the conversation outside the course room
Quality (n=3)	Sample Response
Reading Responding Resources Visibility Constructive Expectations	This would entail providing unit summary feedback, checking in mid week to respond to Posts, even if it is a brief response with question or a "how about considering A, B and C? This shows that the instructor has actually read the Post. Making an effort to "speak" to all learners in the discussion.
Frequency (n=3)	Sample Response
Almost Daily Guidance	These instructors respond to direct questions within 24 hours. They need not respond to every question, but should respond as necessary to steer the discussion or reveal concepts which previously may not have been considered. They should also provide timely feedback on course assignments.

With respect to the perspectives on an instructor's low presence, the comments identify factors related to commitment, reliability and the quality, exemplified by comments such as "the instructor that does not provide guidance, such as clarification on assignments or that becomes defensive when assignments are questioned". Additional examples and themes with relation to this are provided in Table 5.

In comparing this data, one of the interesting aspects emerging is the discrepancies between perceptions of high and low instructor presence and the frequency of responses. Whereas high presence was identified as being active on a daily basis, and providing responses to learners within 24 hours, low presence was seen as visiting the course room less than weekly. The important issue is not the quantitative frequency of online activity, but that teachers and learners are operating in environments where their expectations of presence will impact on the perceived value of the interactions.

Online presence and critical thinking

The learners we, and other online teachers encounter, are diverse and bring a range of expectations to that environment. In this initial analysis of online learner perceptions, the classification of those perceptions suggests that online presence is complex, diverse and variable. One explanation for this outcome is the diversity of the learner groups. While all are looking to further their career through securing a higher degree, some do not have extensive recent educational experience. For some their work life has significant impact on their online activity, as their interest is any time any place learning rather than

online collaboration. In contrast, there are others who wish to engage and enter into a community ethos, albeit for a short twelve week course of study.

Table 5: Classification of low online teacher presence

5. What characterises instructors who, in your opinion, have low Course Room presence?	
Personal (n=3)	Sample Responses
Disconnected Uncommitted	Those that prefer to stay back but may become disconnected from the group.
Reliability (n=2)	Sample Response
Irregular	Instructors who do not do as those with high course presence or those who state they're going to post or follow up on something but do not.
Quality (n=4)	Sample Response
Scrutiny Preferential Arrogance Superficial	Instructors who are not truly scrutinising the quality of the contributions being made by learners and not guiding the discussion to be in line with the direction of the week's unit.
Frequency (n=2)	Sample Response
Not Weekly	Do not visit the course room on a weekly basis allow the learners to facilitate their own discussion for weeks at a time

By seeking input from a small group of online learners, the need to cater for multiple perspectives appears to be a key factor, especially when the perception of presence for the learner relates as much to meeting personal life style needs as it does to interacting with other learners. However, to avoid moving into an environment that is essentially one to one between teacher and learner, it is essential to identify strategies that can assist both the teacher and the learner to maximise their online experience.

With respect to the questions posed, we offer the following suggestions:

1. How can a teacher be present enough (or perceived to be present enough) that students benefit from their subject matter expertise without being so present that she or he does not inhibit the students from learning from one another? It is our contention that in addition to the teacher presenting the learners with their expectations from participation and communication, it is important to model a profile of the learners based on their expectations for access to the instructor and the communication expected from that instructor. This can involve understanding more about each cohort of learners and adapting course delivery to meet those needs. One way to achieve this would be through an instrument that assesses the presence learners are likely to bring to their studies.
2. Given that students have different educational goals (pragmatic, economic, scholarly), and assuming that those goals help form students' expectations of teacher presence, is it possible (or desirable) for a teacher to be present (or perceived as present) at different levels for different students? Based on the data reported it would appear that it is desirable for a teacher to be present at different levels for different students. Enabling strategies to achieve this without significant increases in workload would be a key challenge.
3. Given that students are at different stages of cognitive development (Perry, 1970), and assuming that those stages help form student expectations of teacher presence, is it possible (or desirable) for a teacher to be present (or be perceived as present) at different stages for different students? Again we would argue that this is certainly desirable, with the possibility that it can occur if the understandings between learner and teacher are better defined at the commencement of their interactions.

To this end we propose a two dimensional model (Table 6) based on educational goals and cognitive development that provides a guideline on how these interactions might be facilitated. This model is very much embryonic, based on our personal experiences and the initial analysis of student perceptions as presented in this paper. However, we also see that this extends existing models of presence (eg Garrison et al, 2004) to include that of learner presence, which would delineate their specific characteristics that might potentially impact on performance, interaction and engagement.

Table 6: Teacher strategies for multiple perspectives of learners

	Educational Goals			
	Pragmatic	Economic	Scholarly	
Cognitive Development	Dualistic	* State key criteria * Define outcomes explicitly * Confirm achievement of learning	* Express value of course * Identify key policies	* Establish framework * Assist construction of outcomes * Define theoretical framework
	Multipilistic	* Identify relevance of criteria * Enable application of outcomes * Maintain goals	* Assess career continuum * Link expertise of environment	* Examine extended resources * Negotiate contextual outcomes
	Relativistic	Negotiate criteria Negotiate outcomes Negotiate support	* Identify outcomes of investment * Note career relevance *	* Assume independence * Establish collegial communication * Negotiate alternative outcomes

Conclusion

The online teaching and learning environment is becoming more prevalent and with that growth, different forms of interactions and expectations of both teachers and learners are emerging. In this paper we have explored the understandings of learners towards their own online presence and those of their teachers, and proposed that addressing the multiple perspectives that characterise the groups of online learners is key to a more successful educational experience.

While the current models of best practice (Salmon, 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 2003) provide excellent strategies to manage the mechanics of a successful online course, the data considered in this paper suggests that the accompanying dynamics of the online experience are equally complex and require further consideration. One proposed means to achieve this is to extend current models of presence to integrate that of the learner. In making these conclusions, it has to be acknowledged that the data has been provided by learners who are learning independently, at a distance and within an asynchronous discussion model. As there are many different implementations of online learning, the application of our proposal to other settings will require further investigation.

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