

# SOLE Case Study Series



## Discourse Analysis Report

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# SOLE Discourse Analysis

## A case study

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### Document Notes

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# 1. Introduction

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## 1.1 Aims and context

### 1.1.1 Aims

The aims of this study were to investigate a subset of the SOLE data with a view to answering the following research questions:

- ◆ How do students choose to communicate (how? when? why?) and for what purposes? How do the VLE tools support this?
- ◆ Who is/what is the role of the tutor? What is the role of the student? How do these relate to the implicit, explicit, actual model of learning? And to student participation in the VLE?
- ◆ Are we able to identify issues around authority (of knowledge; of expertise; teacher-student communications) in relation to VLEs?

### 1.1.2 Context: teacher-centred and learner-centred learning

These questions were understood in the context of an alleged shift to a more collaborative learning model that may be associated with the use of certain VLE tools, such as discussion boards. Goodyear (2001) has described checklists that can be used to ascertain whether such a shift is taking place:

In a networked learning environment:

- ◆ The teacher's role changes from oracle and lecturer to consultant, guide, and resource provider
- ◆ Teachers become expert questioners, rather than providers of answers
- ◆ Teachers become designers of learning student experiences rather than just providers of content
- ◆ Teachers provide only the initial structure to student work, encouraging increasing self-direction
- ◆ Teacher presents multiple perspectives on topics, emphasizing the salient points
- ◆ From a solitary teacher to a member of a learning team (reduces isolation sometimes experienced by teachers)
- ◆ From teacher having total autonomy to activities that can be broadly assessed
- ◆ From total control of the teaching environment to sharing with the student as fellow learner
- ◆ More emphasis on sensitivity to student learning styles
- ◆ Teacher-learner power structures erode
- ◆ Students' role changes from passive receptacles for hand-me-down knowledge to constructors of their own knowledge
- ◆ Students become complex problem-solvers rather than just memorizers of facts
- ◆ Students see topics from multiple perspectives
- ◆ Students refine their own questions and search for their own answers
- ◆ Students work as group members on more collaborative/cooperative assignments; group interaction significantly increased
- ◆ Increased multi-cultural awareness
- ◆ Students work toward fluency with the same tools as professionals in their field
- ◆ More emphasis on students as autonomous, independent, self-motivated managers of their own time and learning process
- ◆ Discussion of students' own work in the classroom

- ◆ Emphasis on knowledge use rather than only observation of the teacher's expert performance or just learning to "pass the test"
- ◆ Emphasis on acquiring learning strategies (both individually and collaboratively)
- ◆ Access to resources is significantly expanded

This shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centred pedagogy lies at the heart of the research questions, and is the context in which we approached the data.

### 1.1.3 Implicit assumptions

We will argue that implicit in the SOLE research is an agenda – that learning online will or should lead to constructivist learning, as described above. Casting the above checklists as a framework for the discourse analysis illustrates both that these values were present in SOLE as a whole, and that they framed this discourse study in particular. The SOLE research questions also reveal what one might call learner-centred values or assumptions. For example, one research question reads “How do students choose to communicate?”. This seems to imply an active role for students, but the data we discuss does not support an assertion that online learning necessarily leads to learner-centred-ness. At this point we would merely like to note that the brief we were given reflects in places a more general set of values (that collaboration is good for learning, that VLEs can enhance collaboration, and so on), and that these values colour what might be identified as significant phenomena to be explained (for example, non-participation in a discussion board). It is worth considering these matters while reading this report, and we will return to them in Chapter 4.

## 1.2 Methodology

The study uses discourse analysis (DA). This term means many things, but in general DA can be said to focus on the way that someone structures the substance of their talk (or writing, or email, etc). This is relatively distinct from content or thematic analysis, which focuses on the substance itself. If pushed further, many DA practitioners will disagree on what is legitimate and proper analysis, so that we should be clear about the influences that we have drawn on to conduct our analyses. These are principally three: critical discourse analysis, Halliday's functional grammar, and conversation analysis.

### 1.2.1 Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

CDA is derived mainly from the work of Norman Fairclough (1989). He sets out three levels at which texts should be analysed, with a view to uncovering, as he sees it, the implicit power relations that they enact and embody. These three levels of analysis are:

1. the textual ('description' - how does the text manage to mean what it does?);
2. the interactional ('interpretation' - what does the text do, what move does it make?); and
3. the social (explanation - what were the conditions of the text's production and interpretation?).

Drawing on these three levels of analysis, we have been concerned with such matters as:

- ◆ Euphemism, synonymy, metaphor, and so on
- ◆ Formal or other distinctive vocabularies
- ◆ Use of the passive and active voice
- ◆ Sentence form (interrogative, declarative, and so on)
- ◆ Modality (such verbs as 'may', 'might', 'should' and so on)
- ◆ Presupposition (where a question may presuppose a state of affairs that might have been contestable)

- ◆ Genre, or text schema, or rules under which a particular activity is usually undertaken

Noticing where and when these phenomena occur gives us vital clues in uncovering the implicit structure of the events being represented.

### 1.2.2 Functional grammar

Halliday's system of functional grammar (Halliday 1994) is an extremely detailed approach to the workings of language. It is founded on three analytic categories that can be used for thinking about language use:

1. textual - this includes traditional grammar, and concerns the formal ways in which a text is put together
2. interactional - this relates to those aspects of the text that one might describe as 'social', for example greetings or salutations, but also times when an utterance is noticeably addressing someone, or serving some interactional role (for example, asking a question)
3. ideational - this refers to the substantive contents of an utterance, the ideas or objects referred to

Clearly, any real use of language is almost certain to involve all three categories. However, by observing how each is deployed in particular ways, or is noticeably absent, we can draw conclusions about what that use of language is achieving. The relationship between these three categories and Fairclough's levels of analysis is not straightforward.

### 1.2.3 Conversation analysis and derived approaches

Conversation analysis (Psathas 1995) is an ethnomethodological discipline that is focused on the rules that govern natural interactive talk. Founded by Harvey Sacks (1992), its proponents have discovered a range of normative rules that seem to be relevant to natural interactive talk. These include:

- ❖ Turn-taking, and next speaker selection - for example, in ordinary conversation this is governed by a clearly sequenced rule-set as outlined in Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974).
- ❖ Adjacency pairs - for example, questions and answers, so that a question expects either an answer or one of a small number of other possible responses (request for clarification, denial of relevance of the question, and so on). Each of these possible responses itself has only a limited set of possible 'next moves'.
- ❖ Preference structures - certain first-parts of adjacency pairs (for example, invitations) have an in-built preference structure. Whereas an acceptance can be accomplished with no problem, a rejection is likely to be marked by hesitation, self repair (such as "No, well, er, I - we were going to..."), followed by an account.

Other approaches have built on conversation analysis, and a key concept from these approaches is that of 'category entitlement'. This refers to the way in which people will talk themselves into being a member of a particular category in order to give themselves the right to then perform some action. For example, someone might say "Every night I read an excerpt from Sacks' 'Lectures on Conversation', and I would suggest that your type of analysis is flawed". In this example, the speaker 'works up' membership of the category '*expert on conversation analysis*', in order then to criticise a piece of analysis.

### 1.2.4 Synthesis

While many theoretical aspects of these three approaches are incompatible with each other, we have found that in practice they offer a useful toolkit of 'ways of looking' at discursive data, allowing us a good degree of insight into how particular interactions work in the way that they do, and what sets of shared or contested meanings are being drawn on for those interactions to happen in the way that they do.

## 1.3 The case study

### 1.3.1 Data

The data are a set of transcripts that all relate to one particular module. This was a first-year undergraduate module in macroeconomics (Case Study 8 in the SOLE scheme). The Introduction to Macroeconomics module consisted of weekly lectures and seminars, individual coursework (30%) and an end of semester written exam (70%). The aim of the module was to provide an understanding of the workings of the economy as a whole and the tutor sought to achieve this by actively engaging students as individuals with researching and exploring issues; by relating theory to real world events and by exploring and discussing issues and analytical approaches. Information included on the VLE (WebCT) included all lecture notes, seminar problems and solutions, as well as online formative tests and online discussions. Seminar problems were posted up post-seminar.

The demographic profile of the module was as follows. A total of 67.5% of the 97 students were male (32.5% female), 55% under 21 years of age (45% between 21 and 41 years), 30% were educated in the UK, 22.5% in Africa, and the remainder in a variety of countries around the world. A majority (including the tutor) - 57.5% - did not have English as a first language.

This module was chosen for the single reason that it was the only SOLE case study that offered a reasonable set of data, including a record of the discussion board data, at the time. This has allowed us to focus quite a lot of attention on a single case, and we trust this depth of analysis will compensate for the relative lack of breadth.

The data we used were:

- a. excerpts from first interview with tutor
- b. excerpts from second interview with tutor
- c. discussion board from tutor's module
- d. interview with student1
- e. interview with student2
- f. interview with student3

### 1.3.2 Reliability and validity

Being a single case study, it is not legitimate to generalise from the findings. The aim, rather, is to offer the findings as a description of what happened 'this time', in this case, on the assumption that practitioners and professionals will be able to find sufficient relevant phenomena that can be related to their own work to make the exercise worthwhile.

We have tried to be explicit about the analytic resources (from those outlined in 1.2) we use on particular occasions, and offer the full text of the utterances so that readers can judge for themselves whether our interpretations are reasonable.

### 1.3.3 Ethics

The case we describe was one in which the module did not run as the tutor or students hoped (nor, perhaps as the SOLE researchers hoped). This means that there is a potential issue of blame - whose fault was it that there were problems? We have tried hard to avoid criticising anyone; as well as being researchers, both of us are or have been students and tutors, and we are aware of how hard it is to practice and how easy it is to criticise. We do acknowledge that some parts of this report may read like criticism. We can only emphasise that we have sought to describe, and that this is the spirit in which our analysis is offered.



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## 2. Analysis of the discussion board data

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### 2.1 Introduction

Some basic figures for the discussion board data are given in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Numerical description of the discussion board

<b>Period covered</b>	<b>5 months</b>
<b>People</b>	
Number of tutors contributing on DB	1
Number of students on module	97
Number of students contributing	7
<b>Messages</b>	
Total messages	45
Posted by tutor	25
Posted by students	20
<b>Original messages<sup>1</sup></b>	
Total original messages	28
Original messages by tutor	16
Original messages by students	12
<b>Replies</b>	
Total replies	17
Replies by tutor to student	9
Replies by student to tutor	6
Replies by student to student	2
Student response to a question from the tutor	5
Tutor feedback to contribution from a student	2
Tutor response to a question from a student	6
Student's response to a question from another student	1
<b>Three or more messages in a thread</b>	
Total 3rd+ messages in thread	5
Tutor feedback response by student	1
Student feedback to response by tutor	3
Student feedback to response from student	1

Table 2: Themes of the messages<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> That is, messages that were not replies to another message in a thread.

Themes	Total messages	Posted by tutor	Posted by student
Economics	12	6	6
Exam, marks and coursework	10	4	6
Announcements	8	6	2
Module evaluation	4	3	1
Technical	4	1	3
Using the discussion board	4	4	0
Personal advice	2	2	0
Other	1	0	1
Total	45	26	19

Both the tutor and some students considered the discussion board not to have worked as well as it might (see the analysis of the interview data, Chapter 3), and they had their own theories for why this might have been so. One of the aims of this chapter is to look at the discussion board data itself to see whether there is any evidence there for why the interactions did not sustain what might be called a 'discussion' (in Chapter 4 we look more closely at what it might mean to expect a 'discussion' on a discussion board).

## 2.2 Genre confusion

Perhaps the most striking thing about the discussion board record, apart from the lack of participation by students, is the variety of styles and purposes of the messages, from both tutor and students. We have understood this variety in terms of 'genre', taking genre as being the functional instantiation of structural constraints on language use, imposed by a particular recognised activity type within a self-defined community (Kress 1996<sup>3</sup>). That is, being engaged in a particular activity (such as discussing macroeconomics), within a defined community (such as a tutor group), often tends to lead to messages having certain common elements. These common elements make up a set of normative rules (things that people pay attention to, even if they don't always follow them) that allow interaction to proceed smoothly. This discussion board seemed to lack such rules, because there was no dominant activity type. Table 3 summarises an illustrative range of messages posted, together with an activity type and corresponding message style description for each:

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<sup>2</sup> Clearly, this can only be an approximate categorisation. However, it does give a reasonable overview of the messages posted to the discussion board.

<sup>3</sup> On genre, Kress notes that, "the generic form of a text is an effect of the social conditions of its occasion of production. That is, the participants in a particular occasion of interaction have aims, goals and responsibilities and they stand in particular social relations to each other. They enact all these in that situation and they use language (among other modes) to do so. The resultant linguistic text encodes, realises and represents these aims and purposes, the relations of the participants and the unfolding enactment of that situation. The text which results from the interaction is a map of the social occasion in which it was produced." (1996, p189)

**Table 3: The variety of activities on the discussion board (illustration)**

Message	From	Topic	Activity	Style
95	Tutor	Substantive	Initiating substantive discussion	Case plus a series of questions
96	Tutor	Meta	Invitation to participate	Rationale
101	Tutor	Admin	Dealing with print problems	Advice
112	Student 2	Substantive	Article recommendation	Citation plus evaluation
114	Tutor	Substantive	Evaluation of Student 2's post	Evaluation + directed questioning
138	Student 3	Admin	Request for help obtaining material	Plea
136	Tutor	External	Invitation to nominate lecturer	Announcement
152	Student 6	Meta	Evaluation of course	Justified evaluation
154	Tutor	Meta	Commentary on coursework grades	Tutor evaluation and invitation
164	Student 7	Personal	Request for advice	Opinion and plea
167	Student 2	Admin	Request for help	Descriptive
174	Student 7	Meta	Reassuring tutor	Personal experience / personal

One way of avoiding genre confusion is to set out clearly at the start what activities will take place in the discussion board. Let us, then, look at how this definitional work proceeded between the tutor and students. The first message<sup>4</sup> posted by the tutor is:

**Message no. 95**

Posted by [TUTOR] on Thursday, February 6, 2003 8:11pm

**Subject Interest rate cut**

Today the Bank of England (BoE) cut interest rates by 0.25%. The present interest rate is 3.75%. Why do you think the Bank of England has done this? Why should we be concerned about this decision? Can anybody explain? I welcome any contribution.

[tutor]

Message 95 consists of a description of a topical event, followed by a series of questions. These questions are in a variety of styles from formal ("Why should we be concerned...") to informal ("can anybody explain?"). They also vary markedly in the addressee, from "you", to "we", to "anybody". This implies considerable confusion over the expected roles for participants. "You" suggests tutor-led discussion; "we" suggests a community of learning; and "anybody" suggests a question interrupting a

<sup>4</sup> In fact, the discussion board record shows two messages prior to this, but they are dated 2001. We are unsure whether the students saw these messages and, if so, whether they understood themselves as intended recipients. In this chapter, we have assumed not. However, we have also analysed these messages as if they were the first ones in the discussion board record, and this analysis is presented in Appendix 1.

lecture (as in “Now, can anybody explain why the Bank did this?”). The rules by which students might contribute are different in each of these genres, so that recipients of this message may be left in some confusion over how to respond. Furthermore, the final two sentences of Message 95 (“Can anybody explain? I welcome any contribution”) are in the form of announcements to an undifferentiated group, within a public sphere (See Genre tension: public/private, below). That is, they are in the style of an announcement to a lecture room full of students, to which there is unlikely to be a response, given the lack of an incentive and the risk that a student may feel by putting their hand up (see ‘Risk’, below). It would seem, then, that the tutor’s engagement is probably in a genre along the lines of a lecture or tutor-led tutorial, but that this is not wholly clear.

Message 95 is quickly followed, two minutes later, by Message 96:

**Message no. 96**

Posted by [TUTOR] on Thursday, February 6, 2003 8:13pm

**Subject The discussion board**

Dear all,

the discussion board will be used as a mean of communication between me and you and for discussions concerning macroeconomic events. I hope you will take the opportunity to use it throughout the semester. We will not always be able to discuss every aspect of macroeconomics in class. So, this discussions can help us communicate more effectively. I hope you will take up this opportunity that I hope will help your learning.

[tutor]

This is the kind of message that one might expect at the start of term, introducing students to the discussion board and setting out the activities and rules relevant to participation. Taking the interactional elements to this message first, it starts with a greeting that addresses the students as a group, as if making a public announcement to a group (as is reasonable from the point of view of a tutor who does not yet know his class individually). However, it clearly places the tutor at the ‘front of the class’, where the class is a discrete and undifferentiated unit. Any student reading this is being addressed as a member of this unit (or category<sup>5</sup>), as they would be by a similar announcement in a lecture hall. The message ends with a sentence “I hope you will take up this opportunity that I hope will help your learning”. The interactional orientation of this is quite different to “Dear all”, as it addresses the ambiguously singular/plural ‘you’. It is also written using phrases from an ‘educational’ discourse, that is, one that might be used between education professionals, rather than to first year undergraduates (“take up this opportunity”, “help your learning”), although this might also be heard as the tutor wanting the students to take responsibility for their own learning (a fairly student-centred approach, which ties interestingly with what the tutor said in the interviews – see Chapter 3). We might conclude that this message positions its recipient in a variety of ways, suggesting that appropriate responses might be in any of a number of genres.

The substantive comments about the discussion board portray it as an overflow from class; as a place for material that didn’t fit in class. This rather teacher-centered view of a subject as consisting in amounts of material to be covered contrasts with “discuss” / “discussions”, which signal a more learner-centred approach. This in turn contrasts with the first purpose of the discussion board described here, that of being “a mean[s] of communication between me and you”, which strongly implies uni-directional communication. This ambiguity in the tutor’s approach is described in more detail in Chapter 3, and is here reflected in his description of the discussion board.

So, how does Message 96 work with Message 95, that was posted only two minutes earlier? They are consistent in their ambiguity over the position of the recipient. Message 96 also configures Message 95 as following one of the rules of the discussion board (that it should be about macroeconomic events), though neither message specifies how (that is, in what genre) these events should be related to the material of the course.

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<sup>5</sup> That is, the category of student in a teacher-centred learning episode, with the associated expectations, responsibilities and so on.

It is clear that the opening messages from the tutor do not succeed in setting up the discussion board in terms of its substance or the rules for engaging. There are a number of genres that might be appropriate, but no one to which students might adhere with any confidence. The tutor seems unclear about his own role (leader of discussion, facilitator of peer-peer discussion, and so on), and about the activity set that he is anticipating.

The recipients of these messages were first year undergraduates, over 80% of whom had not used WebCT before. They were therefore relatively new to both academic question-and-answer styles and to educational discussion forums. Some may, of course, have used internet discussion forums, but the rules for academic interaction are different to those for chat rooms, and are not self-evident.

## 2.3 Genre tension

The ambiguity about genres described above not only suggests confusion; we might also understand that there is 'genre tension' (Lingard et al. 2003). That is, some of the genres that might be in play are incompatible. Any potential participant will have to negotiate this genre tension, which will add to the risk involved in participating (see Chapter 4). We have identified genre tension between four such antagonistic pairs:

### 2.3.1 Genre tension: public / private

Is the discussion board a public or a private space? Is the appropriate genre for a message one closer to public discussion and debate, or is it closer to private email? As noted above, the tutor's introduction to the discussion board is not clear on this point. Messages 95 and 96 have elements of both public ("Dear all") and private ("why do you think...") styles of communication. Furthermore, Message 99 reminds participants that the discussion board will form the data for a study (SOLE), so that it is doubly public. Of course, discussion board interaction often has elements of being a performed discussion (that is, the participants are aware of an audience other than the recipient of the message, and structure their contributions to reflect this awareness). However, this is a skill that is not apparent in this discussion board. For example, the following response to the tutor's message 154, which outlines disappointing coursework grades and asks students who failed to get in touch:

**Message no. 159**

Posted by [STUDENT6] on Tuesday, May 13, 2003 12:21pm

**Subject re:coursework grade**

Dear Sir My I.D number is xxxxxxxx, I checked the grades that you posted on the web site and according to the web site I got Grade B. may I know how far was I to get grade a please, and also how much marks approximately do I need to get to pass the coursework overall. I would like to tell thanks to all the lecturers who created the website called webct because I think that this was very useful for me with my coursework and exam because its got relevant and useful links. thank

This message exhibits clear genre tension between a private letter (even in the greeting, "Dear Sir") in response to a public posting by the tutor. The student has not learned (and has had no apparent guidance on) the appropriate use of the discussion board. Presumably, the tutor responded privately to this student. However, things are not so simple, because the tutor responds differently in a later exchange (Messages 164 and 165), evaluating a Student 7's essay-writing skills on the public discussion board. Such exchanges cannot easily be structured to show an awareness of an audience other than the recipient; they are of the genre 'private consultation or tutorial', and necessarily exclude any other audience than the recipient. This is unlikely to promote participation. This awkward juxtaposition of genres is even more clearly apparent in a later exchange between Student 7 and the tutor:

**Message no. 172**

Posted by [STUDENT7] on Wednesday, July 9, 2003 1:35pm

**Subject THE RESULTS**

Dear [tutor],

The results in general did not seem too good, as there were only 3 As and 3 Bs and the rest full of Cs and Ds and F. (NOT FAIR!). What did we do wrong? Anyway mine was OK thanks to you at least I don't have to resit the exam. Bye for now.

[student7].

This message contains elements of public, inclusive discourse ("what did we do wrong?") and elements of private, exclusive discourse ("I don't have to resit"). Again, the tutor responds to this hybrid message, and his response also includes both genres (Message 173). In summary, it appears that both public and private genres are used in the discussion board, and that this may have contributed to non-participation, because those not directly involved were either excluded or found themselves ambiguously positioned with respect to particular exchanges.

### 2.3.2 Genre tension: academic / informal

In some places, it appears that the tutor is setting an example of using an academic style of writing, i.e. relatively formal, with references to further literature. For example,

**Message no. 108**[Branch from no. 105]

Posted by [TUTOR] on Tuesday, March 4, 2003 11:08pm

**Subject Re: Interest rate cut**

This is a positive contribution and the explanation makes sense. Now, there are two questions we need to address: a) why did the Central Bank want consumers to spend more or firms to invest more? b) some economists disagreed with decision to cut the interest rate. Why do you think that this policy change was so controversial? Contributions are welcome from everybody! Please post your own contribution here! Hopefully, these discussions will help you get a better understanding of macroeconomics.

[tutor]

This message is posted in response to a short contribution by a student. The academic style is clear in the early part of the message in such phrases as "positive contribution" (which is also evaluative, see 2.3.4 below), and "questions we need to address". However, when the tutor begins to exhort the students to participate, the style is noticeably informal (and interactional, see below; even slightly desperate!). The students may be left in some confusion as to what style of response is appropriate.

### 2.3.3 Genre tension: tutor-led / student-led

Who should take the initiative on the discussion board? The initial messages from the tutor are ambiguous on this point<sup>6</sup>, and yet turn-taking rules have been shown to be key to ensuring that interaction proceeds smoothly. As noted above, Message 96 suggests that the interactions will be tutor-led, especially coming immediately after such a leading message (95). Analysis of the following sequence brings out many issues, including this tension over who leads the interaction:

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<sup>6</sup> Although, of course, being initial messages from the tutor they imply that the tutor takes the lead.

**Message no. 112**

Posted by [STUDENT2] on Tuesday, March 11, 2003 9:39am

**Subject Relevant New York Times column**

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/11/opinion/11KRUG.html?ex=1048374816&ei=1&en=358091fdf26252c6>

Access requires registration, but it is free.

Interesting view into interaction of money market, tax cuts, government spending, war, and how textbook authors are real people. Krugman is generally on the left, by the way.

**Message no. 114**[Branch from no. 112]

Posted by [TUTOR] on Thursday, March 13, 2003 10:07am

**Subject Re: Relevant New York Times column**

[Student 2],

this is an excellent link. I do not think that the political views of Krugman are an important issue here. As an economist he raises specific problems related to the economic policy of the present American administration. Now, I have some questions for you all. In order to fully understand this article we need to have some points clear in our mind. Try to give an answer to the following questions:

- a) what is the main issue raised in the article?
- b) What are the two theories that link budget deficits to the interest rate? In other words: there are two stories that we can tell to explain why a higher budget deficit can lead to higher interest rates. Can you explain what these stories are?
- c) Do you think that a similar problem will affect the UK?

Any contribution is welcome. Please add your own opinion/analysis. Do not worry about writing silly things. We are here to learn and we can learn only by sharing information and by making mistakes. Hope you will engage in this.

[tutor]

Taking message 112 first, it is interesting to note that it contains no interactional elements at all (no greeting or salutation, no signature, not even any reference to 'you' or 'we'). The message is entirely ideational, in Halliday's terms, it is just information<sup>7</sup>. The lack of interactional elements means that there is no clue as to what the reader is supposed to do with this message.

More relevantly to this section on the tutor-led / student-led tension, the student adds the phrase "Krugman is generally on the left, by the way." This suggests that the student has a long term familiarity with author in question, and knows their political bias. We suggest that this does a number of things. First, it acts as a category entitlement. That is, the student is working himself up as a

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<sup>7</sup> In Chapter 3, we suggest that the tutor's pedagogic approach may set the tone for interaction, and that inasmuch as this is 'content'-oriented and teacher-centred, it may suggest to students that this is the tone to adopt on the discussion board. Certainly this is the tone adopted by this student, who is by far the most prolific poster of messages relating to economics.

member of a category of people who are qualified to offer advice. Second, therefore, this message has a genre 'advice from an expert', or 'tip'. Finally, by adopting the genre of the 'tip', it makes it very hard for other students to respond with any degree of mutuality – that is, in the same kind of way. They are in the position of those lacking information, in need of advice from an expert. If we assume that discussion implies some degree of mutuality (see 4.2.1), then message 112 offers little scope.

Looking now at message 114, the tutor's first move is to evaluate the students message. We will discuss evaluation by the tutor in 2.3.4 below, but it has a particular effect in this message, that we will come to shortly. The interest at this point is in the tension in 114 between a tutor-led and a student-led approach:

- ◆ the tutor responds positively to a student-led post (student-led);
- ◆ the tutor then directs the attention of the whole student group to certain questions (tutor-led);

That is, we can understand this sequence as consisting of a student's attempt to set the topic of the interaction (albeit without being likely to promote discussion), followed by the tutor's attempt to take this control back, and set the topic himself. We see signs, therefore, of some moves by a student to lead the interaction, but these are met by an instant challenge by the tutor.

The tutor then asks for opinions/analysis, and for sharing information. This may appear to be a strong plea for a student-led discussion but, if it is, it does not work. There is no more participation after this message than there was before it. Can we see anything in this message that might suggest reasons for its lack of success? There are two aspects that undermine it as a plea for student-led discussion. First, the tutor suggests that students should not worry about writing silly things. Given that lack of participation in the discussion board up to this point, this comment would suggest to students that the tutor has understood their silence as being due to a fear of looking foolish. This puts students into a difficult position from which to respond or initiate discussion, especially as they are aware that the tutor may evaluate any posting from them. Second, the tutor notes that "We are here to learn and we can learn only by sharing information and by making mistakes". While this may be a part of the point of collaborative learning, it is difficult for the tutor to use it as a plea for participation. In its delivered form, using "we", it begs the questions 'who is 'we'?', and 'who will decide when something is a mistake?'. The answers to these questions are likely to contradict each other (the tutor will decide when something is a mistake, and therefore is not a part of the 'we' who is learning), so that the sentence is revealed to be disingenuous. On the other hand, if the tutor had used 'you' instead of 'we', this would have described a wholly tutor-led approach. Caught between the two, the genres undermine each other leaving students in a very difficult position from which to make a contribution.

### 2.3.4 Genre tension: discussion (interactional-participative) / evaluation (ideational-evaluative)

In a sense, this is a key discord within the discussion board, linking on to the models of learning discussed in Chapter 3. Messages posted by both tutors and students vary in the extent to which they include an interactional component (the 'social' side of messages, where communication is oriented to the other person or people, more than their ideas, see Halliday 1994). The tutor's messages also contain clear evaluations of the ideas in students' messages, as illustrated in the following exchange, which has already been touched on above:

**Message no. 105**[Branch from no. 95]  
Posted by [**STUDENT1**] on Friday, February 28, 2003 11:13pm  
**Subject Re: Interest rate cut**

The bank of england may have cut interest rates to increase consumer spending as well as firms taking advantage to borrow money to invest.



**Message no. 108**[Branch from no. 105]  
Posted by [TUTOR] on Tuesday, March 4, 2003 11:08pm  
**Subject Re: Interest rate cut**

This is a positive contribution and the explanation makes sense. Now, there are two questions we need to address: a) why did the Central Bank want consumers to spend more or firms to invest more? b) some economists disagreed with decision to cut the interest rate. Why do you think that this policy change was so controversial? Contributions are welcome from everybody! Please post your own contribution here! Hopefully, these discussions will help you get a better understanding of macroeconomics.

[tutor]

Message 105 is a response to the tutor's message 95 (see above). Again, like 112, it contains no interactional component at all (for example, no salutation, and no signing off or signature), and so is wholly ideational; that is, it is concerned only with the topic at hand. Message 108 is almost as impersonal, although the tutor does at least add his name at the end. The tutor's immediate response is evaluative ("a positive contribution", "makes sense"). It is worth considering how the non-recipient audience might read this first move by the tutor: will all messages be immediately evaluated by him? Is submission-evaluation the appropriate genre, as in the familiar classroom 'recitation' sequence: Question-Response-Evaluation (Tharp & Gallimore 1988)?

The middle section of message 108 is ideational, guiding the students to a particular set of questions. Note the similarity in structure to message 114 (even down to the shift from 'we' in line 2, to 'you' in line 6), discussed above in relation to the tension between a tutor-led and a student-led genre. There follow two sentences, each marked with exclamation marks, that focus on the interaction rather than the topic at hand. In face to face conversations, ideational and interactional elements are usually skillfully intermingled to produce smooth interaction (think of the importance of eye contact even when delivering a lecture). However, this is less easy online, and message 108 separates the two completely. On the one hand there is the academic and evaluative focus of the early part of the message, and on the other there is the strongly interactional focus of the latter part. The two approaches undermine each other, one inhibiting contributions (by suggesting they will be publicly evaluated using academic criteria), the other pleading for them.

## **2.4 What's behind the mask? Assessment**

### **2.4.1 The trajectory of invitation**

Given this lack of participation by students, how does the tutor proceed? It is often when an interaction fails for some reason, and someone tries to 'repair' it, that the mechanisms on which it was based become apparent. In fact, we can trace a fairly clear trajectory in the tutor's messages relating to the substantive interaction (that is, that relating to macroeconomics), illustrated by the following messages:

**Message no. 96**

Posted by [TUTOR] on Thursday, February 6, 2003 8:13pm  
**Subject The discussion board**

Dear all,

the discussion board will be used as a mean of communication between me and you and for discussions concerning macroeconomic events. I hope you will take the opportunity to use it throughout the semester. We will not always be able to discuss every aspect of macroeconomics in class. So, this discussions can help us communicate more effectively. I hope you will take up this opportunity that I hope will help your learning.

[tutor]

Although ambiguous in terms of genre, this message does include the inclusive, collaborative sentences "We will not always be able to discuss every aspect of macroeconomics in class. So, this discussions can help us communicate more effectively." This ambiguity or tension (see above) is further emphasized in message 114. In message 121, the tutor appears more directive or desparate to have the interaction succeed:

**Message no. 121**[Branch from no. 117]

Posted by [TUTOR] on Monday, March 24, 2003 7:55pm  
**Subject Re: RPI story**

[student2],

this is a good article. I think that the inclusion of Slimming course fees really shows how we are changing. In the past milk, bread and basic food would be the centrepiece of the RPI basket. Now instead... However, the inclusion of hair gel is the most important development... Any other thoughts from other students? Please talk to us!!!!

[tutor]

Only three minutes later, the tutor posts message 122:

**Message no. 122**

Posted by [TUTOR] on Monday, March 24, 2003 7:58pm  
**Subject Warning!**

Dear all,

given that nobody (apart from [student2]) is contributing to the debates/discussions on WebCT I am considering FAILING those students who do not contribute in some way by posting at least one email. I will think over this strategy...

[tutor]

Suddenly the collaborative approach is revealed to have force behind it, it may be linked to the assessment. Given that 85% of the students claimed in the questionnaire that doing well in the assessment was a key motivator (more than double the figure for any other potential motivating factor), this is important. The message clearly asserts the tutor's role as student assessor, and emphasises the ambiguity or tension between that role and that of discussion facilitator, to which we will return below. It also, of course, confirms that online discussions are not linked to the assessment

at the moment. So, does this message work? It is followed by silence on the discussion board for two weeks, until the tutor posts a topical reference and follow-up question in message 131, which evokes the final contribution to the discussion board:

**Message no. 137**[Branch from no. 131]  
Posted by [**STUDENT5**] on Wednesday, April 23, 2003 1:37pm  
**Subject Re: War and Economics**

I've read this article.

This message (the only one posted by student5) merely registers participation, without actually participating. The message demonstrates one compromise adopted by a student faced with conflicting demands of different genres and roles, as emphasised by message 122, which is to post a message that says nothing substantive at all.

So, how did the tutor summarise this discussion? In the final interview, he noted that “this year, more than in the past, students posted e-mails on WebCT rather than e-mailing directly to me on my normal e-mail address. And so, that gives me a sense that the students are using, or seeing more WebCT as a kind of teaching tool, as a place where I am, and where I can give them answers.” That is, it was the students who, by not discussing, decided that the discussion board was a teacher-centered forum, and not a ‘discussion’ board at all.

#### **2.4.2 Roles – assessor and assessed**

The importance of assessment was noted above, in that the tutor’s role as assessor emerged clearly as a way for him to give the students an incentive to participate. The incentive failed for the most part, and it is worth considering, from a discursive point of view, why. The following exchange takes place toward the end of the module, long after those discussed above.

**Message no. 161**  
Posted by [**STUDENT7**] on Tuesday, June 3, 2003 1:51pm  
**Subject THE EXAM.**

The exam i think was fairly okay, i did not really get to answer the second part of section D on exchange rates very well because it was quite confusing since the economy was no longer in equilibrium as investments had fallen...

Have a nice holiday and please be lenient in your marking so we could all pass. Thank you very much for the time and patience you took to take us through this moudle it is highly appreciated. bye for now.

[student7].

**Message no. 162**[Branch from no. 161]  
Posted by [TUTOR] on Wednesday, June 4, 2003 8:41am  
**Subject Re: THE EXAM.**

[student7],

thank you for your email. The exam was set up with the aim of testing your knowledge and your ability to show a deeper understanding of macroeconomics. When it comes to the evaluation of the questions in section D and E I will mainly be looking at your ability to provide a rational and consistent interpretation of how the macroeconomy behaves once a shock has created a disequilibrium. As long as I get a sense that you have a general understanding of how the economy would adjust, then I will be happy even if some aspects might not be correct...

Have a nice summer.

[tutor]

Focusing firstly on message 161, from Student 7. Interestingly, in this first message in the thread, the student is evaluating the tutor's activity in setting the exam. She may be challenging the tutor's authority in a subtle way, that we will come back to below. The style is noticeably personal; note the strongly interactional, even friendly phrases such as 'have a nice holiday' and 'bye for now'. These perhaps go beyond public discussion and are more like the phrases one would find in a personal email or conversation. However, this is a public discussion board. We saw above how the genre of classroom interaction (the 'recitation' sequence) was common in the substantive interactions. Here, though, the genre is more 'personal email' or even 'private conversation'. There appears to be no set of rules or genre between 'classroom interaction' and 'private conversation' that the tutor and students can use to structure their interactions. Message 162 from the tutor continues the personal tone set by the student, particularly at the end. Most of the people reading these messages will not be direct parties to this conversation, and we should ask what the interactional effect of this personal tone is on them. As the interaction is in the form of a one-to-one conversation, it makes it hard for them to contribute. Within the genre of private conversation, any reply by a third party would be 'interrupting'. The rest of the students may well feel excluded from the discussion board at this point.

However, the tutor and student are engaged in a discussion at this point, unlike previous interactions on the discussion board, which have mostly been entirely ideational or content-driven. Both tutor and student are treating each other's messages as coming from a person, rather than focusing mainly on the ideas. The tutor does not evaluate the student's message, but responds to it on its own terms. His response is resisting the possible implications of the student's message, but it is treating them as serious, not to be dismissed out of hand, not as mere objects for evaluation.

The student raises a potential issue of blame – she may not have done well in the exam. She suggests that this might have been the exam's fault for being 'confusing'. Of course, both participants know that the tutor sets the exam, so blaming the exam is like blaming the tutor – it makes the tutor accountable. Secondly, she notes that the tutor may alleviate the blame by being 'lenient' (an interesting word, implying a role of 'judge passing sentence' perhaps). Thus, she makes the tutor accountable not only for a confusing exam, but also for not being lenient in his evaluation. In both cases, it certainly makes the tutor potentially accountable for the blameworthy issue. In responding, the tutor uses the passive 'the exam was set up' hiding his agency in setting the exam, and therefore making it difficult to lay blame / responsibility (for it being confusing) at this point. The second part of the student's challenge asks whether the tutor will be 'lenient' in the evaluation. There is a professional problem for the tutor with this, as leniency is not part of his assessment toolkit – it belongs to that of a judge passing sentence not a tutor marking an exam (individual circumstances are taken into account in a different way in courts of law and in exams). To respond to the student's request, the tutor outlines what he will be looking for. Again, this shifts the active role away from him to, on the one hand some clear assessment criteria and, on the other hand, the student's exam paper. The tutor's role is limited to matching the two. He specifically does not have an active role in which 'leniency' would be possible.

In her response (not shown), the student accepts that any blame probably lies with her, explaining it in

terms of her essay-writing skills, and this explanation is accepted by the tutor in a further message (also not shown).

Assessment is therefore a cornerstone of the tutor's authority. That is, he does not allow discussion to focus on the substance of the assessment instrument (was it really confusing?) or criteria (can he be lenient?). The student is left to take responsibility for any problem with the exam result. Just to be clear, we are not saying that there is anything wrong with this (given the assessment protocol, it is difficult to see what else he might have done). We are just observing that this is what happened.

However, the tutor is clearly trying to do something else in message 162. He goes on to qualify his professional account by noting that he would "be happy" if the student just showed a general understanding. The potentially personal phrasing of "be happy" is interesting; although it could mean "be satisfied", it might also mean "be pleased". The tutor appears to be acknowledging a role for himself encouraging and supporting the student in the discussion board (and, in the interviews, he does say that one aim he has is that the students feel cared for). The message ends in very personal terms, "have a nice summer". There is clearly a willingness to interact, and to use the discussion board for more than giving answers to substantive questions. However, his role as assessor (in the particular assessment system used) stands in the way of this, since it always offers him a source of authority, and always limits the extent to which students can challenge that authority. Discussion as a mutual activity is therefore constrained. This is an echo of earlier interactions on the discussion board – see above – where (we argue) the tutor's role as evaluator inhibits student participation.

## **2.5 Genres, roles and authority**

The section has looked for the reasons why students did not participate in the substantive online discussion. We found that there was a variety of genres being used in the discussion board, some of which undermined each other to the extent that messages seemed disingenuous or contradictory. Looking at how the tutor responded to the non-participation, and at what happened later in discussions about the exam, it would appear that the tutor's role as evaluator and assessor of the students' work made it difficult for him also to facilitate effectively the online discussion (and vice versa for students). Authoritative knowledge resides with the tutor. This emerges from the interviews with him, and from the discussion board data, where his substantive contributions are structured as evaluations in an academic style and are followed by a directive (further information or further questions for the students to address). This also relates to his role as assessor, making attempts at online discussion problematic – what is there to discuss? It would seem from this analysis that there was little evidence here of the kinds of factor described by Goodyear (2001) that indicate a shift to a more constructivist, collaborative style of learning associated with the use of new technologies.

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## 3. Tutor and student interviews

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### 3.1 Introduction

We looked at two interviews with the tutor and one interview with each of three students, to look for implicit and explicit evidence of their respective theories of learning and teaching. It should be noted that the tutor was not a native English speaker, although his English is of near native standard.

### 3.2 Tutor interviews

Within the tutor's interview there seems to be a tension between the discourses of teacher-centred learning and learner-centred learning<sup>8</sup>. The tutor's implicit view of learning and teaching contains both these discourses, and it is this that seems to lead to the difficulties he has in explaining his ideas. Overall, there is a sense that teacher-centredness describes what he does and how he believes things actually happen, but learner-centredness is something that ought to be done.

#### 3.2.1 The role of content and the tutor's role as a provider of content

*3.2.1.1 "the lecture notes really have structure. The structure of the lecture notes should help the structured thinking about things. Macro economics is a very messy kind of subject, in the sense that people can mix together various issues, and in the end when you want a precise answer you get twenty five different possible ways. They should think in the simplest and most linear way possible before they can get on with more complicated things. So I think the lecture notes- the structured lecture notes can help them think in a structured way."*

The word structure is used 5 times in quote 3.2.1.1. The implication is that by cleaning up a messy subject you reduce the potential for confusion. The role of the lecture notes is to deliver exactly what they need to know and no more. The hope seems to be that the structure of learners' thinking about this subject will match the structure of the ideas that are presented to them. In other words the learner's internal cognitive structure about this subject will be formed by the structure presented to them. Knowledge is predigested by the tutor and requires no "processing" on the part of the learner. The implication is that if people come to their understanding in their own way then that will lead to "mess" and confusion.

This view is clearly at odds with the learner-centred principle of constructivist learning that believes people construct knowledge themselves. Learners are seen to fit new information into their own existing internal knowledge structure, which implies a need to deconstruct and process the information as it is presented.

#### 3.2.2 Teacher and learner roles in learning

*3.2.2.1 "In the lecture notes I have the advantage of saying: "OK, you come to lecture, these are the lecture notes, you don't have to take down any notes and so on. So sit down, and then listen carefully to what I say, and participate to what I say. You don't have to waste time writing and listening, because you cannot do those two things at the same time." So that is one major tool in order to try to convey as much information as possible."*

Learning seems to be about listening to what the tutor says (while seated ie passive?). He does however use the word participate. It is not clear what that might mean seems to mean but could be something like "listen in a participative way". It almost seems that the word appears here because the speaker thinks it should be there rather than because it says anything meaningful. It may be a sign

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<sup>8</sup> See 1.1.2 for an definition of these.

that his awareness that learning is “not supposed to be” a passive process is in tension with his positioning the learners in a passive role<sup>9</sup>.

Learners are not able to write and listen at the same time. Writing while listening is a waste of time. The advantage is that learners do not have to do anything that might distract them from the task of absorbing the structured information he is presenting. Passive listeners learn more than people who write while listening. The phrase “sit down and listen carefully to what I say” puts the tutor very clearly at the centre of the teaching and learning discourse.

Teaching is about conveying as much information as possible. The word convey suggests transport, or in the sense of a conveyor or auger, and could be quite mechanical in its connotation – as a mechanical feeder.

Also the word “information” is used here as opposed to “knowledge”, or “ideas”. It seems to say that what is learnt is something static and unquestioned, consisting of “facts”. All these ideas position the learner as a passive consumer of information. Learning is about being fed with “information”. It is interesting to note that this is echoed on the discussion board, where one of the few student messages which attempts to do what the tutor is asking for (message 112, discussed in 2.3.3), the writer positions himself as a provider of “information” rather than someone who discusses or interacts. It may be argued that this quote refers only to lectures and lecture notes and that the tutor’s ideas may be different in other activities. However quote 3.2.3.2 below suggests that he positions himself very much at the centre-stage on the VLE as well.

*3.2.2.2 “This year, more than in the past, students posted e-mails on WebCT rather than e-mailing directly to me on my normal e-mail address. And so, that gives me a sense that the students are using, or seeing more WebCT as a kind of teaching tool, as a place where I am, and where I can give them answers.”*

### 3.2.3 Motivating students

*3.2.3.1 “if students see that there is a website it gives them the sense that they are looked after, that they are cared for and they tend to engage more positively in the sense of saying: “Look, there is a lecturer who makes decent material available to us, and who is doing things”, and I think it gives them, at least a part of them, a sense to engage more with the module.”*

This quote seems to say that:

If a tutor provides a presence and materials the students will feel cared for. If students feel cared for some of them will have “a sense to engage more with the module”. By this he presumably means students will feel more motivated. So again this puts him very much at the centre of the students’ experience, this time in a kind of pastoral role, or even in a maternal role of provider (an echo of the feeding metaphor evoked in quote 3.2.3.1). There seems to be a tension here with the goal of independence espoused in quote 3.2.5.1.

### 3.2.4 Learner independence

*3.2.4.1 INT: “OK. Do you perceive any changes in roles of the student and tutor when using WebCT? And if so, what are your views on this?”*

*TUTOR: “I think one change is, most students become slightly more independent, and being able to access more or less whatever they need, rather than having to come and see me.”*

The tutor seems to be saying that independent learning is about accessing information yourself, rather than asking your tutor for it. This could be seen as a view of learner independence that is limited (“slightly” more independent) to the learner not being dependent on the tutor to physically hand out

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<sup>9</sup> However it may also be a language issue. The tutor is not a native English speaker, and although his English is of a near native level, occasionally differences in nuance or false cognates between his 1<sup>st</sup> language and English may interfere with our interpretation.

materials. It seems to boil down to doing the same things more efficiently (for him). Greater levels of independence such as learners setting their own goals and pursuing their own agendas are not in the picture at this stage.

### 3.2.5 From oracle and lecturer to consultant, guide, and resource provider

3.2.5.1 *“And so, that gives me a sense that the students are using, or seeing more WebCT as a kind of teaching tool, as a place where I am, and where I can give them answers.”*

Puts the tutor right at the center of the student's learning experience. The tutor is a person who gives students answers.

3.2.5.2 *“it frees myself up from a lot of aggravation from having to see students or students knocking at my door, and so on. Plus, it gives me a sense of satisfaction, to say I'm working, students are making use of what I've done, what I've made available to them.”*

The benefits are very much expressed from his own point of view (Less hassle, more satisfaction).

Again it puts him at the center of the teaching/learning experience. In terms of power it actually gives him more because he can keep the students at a distance while controlling the material that they access.

Another piece of evidence suggesting that the teacher puts himself very much at the centre of the learning process is on the discussion board where he is asking a student why so many of them failed the course.

3.2.5.3 *“Was it my teaching style? Did not I explain things properly? Were the topics too difficult? Is not macroeconomics interesting? Maybe the seminars were not helpful? Maybe I did not prepare you for the exam and coursework? Maybe students took it easy and did not put in any effort?”*

These questions can be seen at the interactive level as a series of rhetorical statements made in his own defence. He starts by pointing the blame at himself, then having implicitly discounted these, turns the attention to the students and their lack of effort.

However numerically, 5 of the 7 questions point to him as being the agent of failure – which could be read as meaning that he believes that the main determinant of learning or not is the teacher – again a view of learning that puts the teacher in the centre (and the pre-determined content implied in 2, 3 and 4).

### 3.2.6 Collaborative learning

In interpreting some of the tutor's comments we need to consider how he perceives the role and status of the interviewer. If, as may be the case, he see the interviewer (a researcher) as some kind of authority on the subject of the interview, then some of the interview questions may be experienced as implied challenges, suggesting things he ought to do. See section 4.5 for a fuller analysis of this phenomenon. Sections of the discourse that deal with student-student collaboration seem to be particular cases where this could apply.

3.2.6.1 **INT:** *“OK, thank you. How do you expect students to work together?”*

**TUTOR:** *“Work together, you mean as a group?”*

**INT:** *“Or are you expecting students to work together using WebCT?”*

**TUTOR:** *“No, not- not really. In the sense that the module does not requires students to do for example any kind of group work. There's no work- group work assignment or assessment.”*

The tutor's *“No, not- not really”*, marked by delay and hesitation is clearly a dispreferred response to the interviewer's question, meaning it is not the response he believes the interviewer expects. It



therefore requires an explanation.

*“the module does not require....”* distracts attention from him as being the agent of the decision not to require group work. His own agency is concealed behind the implied authority of “the module” expressed in the very emphatic wording of the sentence – compare with some of his more tentative statements about his ideas for using discussion boards and students working together (see below). This enables him to seem to say “it’s not because I disagree with group work but because it’s not required. “

In the following interviewer’s question (3.2.7.2) the “just” would suggest a presupposition that students talking to each other is better.

**3.2.6.2 Interviewer:** *“So it’s hard when you talked about posting your online discussion are you expecting students to be talking to each other about these issues, or just talking to you about them?”*

**Tutor:** *“No, I mean the idea is for them to talk to each other, and maybe talk to me, but to talk to each other, mainly. The idea of hosting the discussion topics is also one of creating a kind of community if possible,”*

Here he responds by reassuring the interviewer that he does want to encourage students to work together and talk to each other. He even uses a constructivist “buzzword” (community). However he’s quite tentative about this – he says “the idea” rather than “the aim” and also says “if possible”, suggesting he’s not sure whether it is possible. We might guess that either he feels he should pay lip service to these ideas but does not believe them – or perhaps he does believe them but because his experience and instincts lie with teacher-centredness he is still unsure of them in practice.

**3.2.6.3** *“so that in class, for example it’s difficult for some students to intervene because they fear that other people might say things about what they say, or they might laugh, or they might say stupid things. Maybe the screen, or the hiding screen that WebCT provides can give them more incentives to come forward and to express their own opinion.”*

The reason for using the discussion board is that students who don’t express their own opinion in class will feel able to do so online because WebCT gives them a “hiding screen”. Who are “other people” here? Do they include him? (He does not explicitly say that they may also feel afraid of being negatively evaluated by the tutor). He also seems to be saying that the discussion board will foster a greater level of student participation which will lead to the creation of a community, although it is not clear whether this will be an online community.

**3.2.6.4** *“The only other way in which I can expect them to do some work together- to work together, is when the coursework comes... Again the coursework will require them to collect this data, draw these graphs, and comment on graphs, and one thing I will tell them is to look, work together, and if you have any problem when you’re doing it, providing that in the end one of you works it out, and so on, to do things. As long as you don’t plagiarise somebody else’s work. ....”*

So here again there seems to be an acknowledgement that working together is a good thing and he will tell students to do so – he’s giving the interviewer what she wants. But it seems rather ad hoc somehow. Compare “the coursework will require them to..” ie this is set in stone with “and one thing I will tell them is to look, work together...”. This is then followed by two caveats, which seem to indicate concerns that occur to him as he’s speaking, about students doing their own work and not “plagiarizing”. This suggests some ambivalence towards students working together. Finally the “if possible” suggests that yes he thinks group work is a good idea, but it’s not essential and there are potential problems with it, that he doesn’t trust it somehow.

**3.2.6.5** *“They cannot do it anywhere in [tutor’s home country], different country, different students, they cannot, it is impossible for them.....”*

This utterance is hard to interpret, but may mean that students in the tutor’s home country do not have the skills or mindset to work together – or particularly in the context of plagiarism – that students there cannot work together without plagiarizing. Is he then saying that by contrast in this country they can, or at least that although in his experience in his home country they can’t, perhaps here in a different country they might be able to?

3.2.6.6 *"But I would like them if possible here to work together in these groups, primarily sitting around the table showing graphs and saying, what does this mean, what does this graph show? And so on. But otherwise, no, I don't expect them to work together."*

The tentative "if possible" is repeated here. This turn concludes with a negative – perhaps having the effect of toning down any expectations of collaborative learning.

### 3.2.7 Summary

So in summary, the tutor seems to feel either that he ought to be getting students to work together or b) that he thinks the interviewer expects this but a) is not sure that it will work and b) has some misgivings about it

The tutor believes in collaborative learning and wants to try it, although he is unsure about it. However mitigating against this seems to be a sense that the teacher needs to be at the centre of the learning process, and what he does will have a direct effect on what the students learn. We saw this pattern previously when we looked at what actually happened in the discussion board, in section 2.

## 3.3 Student 1

### 3.3.1 From oracle and lecturer to consultant, guide, and resource provider

Student 1 seems to have a more active view of learning than the tutor<sup>10</sup>:

3.3.1.1 *"I think that he was a perfect tutor and he gave many good tips on how to learn and do everything. But he didn't give straight answers. He only gave tips, it was very good."*

To the statement "you have to think for yourself a lot with this kind of learning. ", he strongly agreed because:

3.3.1.2 *"I was given tips and information to find new information, then I have to collect them myself."*

Here what the student is saying is that he liked the fact that he (the student) was not "spoonfed" answers but had to think for himself, suggesting that this student has a view of himself as an independent learner constructing his own knowledge.

3.3.1.3 *"I think I was like a independent learner. I didn't have many contacts with other students. I usually do anything myself; only the course work, I talked about with other students, but I did lot of myself."*

Being an independent learner is set here against working with other students (see also student 2) Independent means independent of other students, but not necessarily of the tutor.

### 3.3.2 Collaborative learning

This student emphasised the social aspects of learning. When asked what had gone badly the first answer that occurred to him was that:

3.3.2.1 *"there was not very much discussion with the student in the WebCT or details of some notes that he gave, only some student wrote some information, some opinions, telling but not much."*

Suggesting that he had anticipated a more collaborative approach to learning and was disappointed that this was not the case,

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<sup>10</sup> *Perhaps in this sense the student experienced the tutor as using a more constructivist approach than the tutor himself realised.*

3.3.2.2 *"it was only good experience for me when I read others opinion and students comments and tutor comments."*

He felt that participating in a discussion would enhance his own motivation:

3.3.2.3 *"I think if I discuss myself or post my own opinion it could be more motivating for me."*

Although interestingly lack of confidence with language acting presumably as a more powerful demotivator.

3.3.2.4 *"but it was also quite motivating for me although I only read those discussion."*

3.3.2.5 *"Because I didn't really know many students about this WebCT, and so I didn't feel that I am part of a group."*

### 3.3.3 The centrality of the tutor

Despite his preference for working things out for himself and for student discussion, he clearly saw the tutor as having a central role.

3.3.3.1 *"Because the tutor was very involving us in this course and this module. I don't know, he was so important. Because if I had some problems , I could go and ask. What I can do now, he was so helpful."*

But that this might have been the reason for the low participation on the discussion board:

3.3.3.2 *"there was not many discussions from fellow students, so – maybe those teacher had so much stronger role in –during this course."*

### 3.3.4 Summary

So in summary it seems that this students' view of learning was that he should be solving problems himself with help from the tutor, and that group discussion with other student can be helpful and motivating.

## 3.4 Student 2

### 3.4.1 The role of content and the teacher's role as a content provider

The teacher gives notes which are intended as guidelines

3.4.1.1 *"I think what he intended us to do was actually use his notes as a guideline."*

which set the agenda for learning

3.4.1.2 *"And having given us that background, it made it much easier for all of us to understand what each topic was actually all about."*

The guidelines put the material to be learned into a linear structure. "Step-by-step" echoes "the most linear way possible" of the tutor (quote 3.2.1.1)..

3.4.1.3 *"Based on the question we aware given in the class, he solved them, and then you could actually see."*

3.4.1.4 *"step-by-step what it all entails."*

..and "rational" and "logical echoes the tutor's "structure thinking" (quote 3.2.1.1).

3.4.1.5 *“economics is quite – has to be rational, and logical about the whole thing.”*

but where the student seems to differ is he does not expect this automatically to become the structure of his own knowledge. He does not use the teachers' guidelines as a definitive set of knowledge to be absorbed as is:

3.4.1.6 *“You know, we shouldn't actually rely upon what he has actually done,”*

3.4.1.7 *“Because the whole idea of having this seminar is not for you to just wait – it's not for you to just collect the information he's given us.”*

but as a starting point

3.4.1.8 *“So I mean, it made things much easier for me, because I just pinpoint: Ok, this is what I don't understand. And then just go to a book – a textbook, and make a reference to it.”*

and a kind of map through the material

3.4.1.9 *“there are some question which you actually couldn't understand what to do until he actually showed you the layout.”*

The student still needs to research and analyse the subject matter.

3.4.1.10 *“But to actually carry out some kind of research into what the topics were.”*

3.4.1.11 *“And research each topic”*

3.4.1.12 *“But to actually research into it, to try to understand it before the seminar itself”*

3.4.1.13 *“When he gives us the lecture notes, we then compare our own analyses with what he has”*

3.4.1.14 *“So if you want to actually understand the course, you have to spend a lot of time on your own, trying to grasp what it is you're being taught.”*

The structure enables the student to see how to approach the subject, it provides a set of starting points and a route through the material, but is not a given that the student will ingest whole.

### **3.4.2 Students as active learners**

The tutor's aim was that his lecture notes (what student 2 refers to as guidelines) would mean that students wouldn't take notes in lecture, which he thought was a “waste of time” (quote 3.2.1.2). However student 2 says that he does make his own notes in lectures but because there's a lot to get down in a short time they are not always complete; the guidelines are useful for checking against his own notes as a way to fill in gaps and identify areas for further clarification.

3.4.2.1 *“Well, I use- most of the time I actually access WebCT because I want to make sure that the notes I had were actually adequate, and you know, were up to date. Because what would happen, because if I was in the lecture theatre, most of the time you spend more time listening to what he's saying than actually writing it down. Because it is quite huge, and he is going quite fast, at a fast pace. So most of the time, I print off what information that was on, then I compared to what I already have, and if I couldn't find the match, then I am going to read my book, or try and to sort it out.”*

3.4.2.2 *“when he gives us the lecture notes, we then compare our own analysis with what he has.”*

3.4.2.3 *“the greatest thing actually I think collected from WebCT is the fact that I could actually make a cross reference between my notes and his notes, and learn upon his own techniques.”*

The student will inevitably take notes, even if the tutor gives out ready prepared lecture notes with the

express intention of preventing the student from taking notes during a lecture.

3.4.2.4 *"if you had the lecture notes before you, you wouldn't have listened to what he was saying. You'd spend more time trying writing the main points."*

Learning is conceived of as an active process. Note how all the verbs in quote 3.1.2.5 position the student as the subject doing things, compared for example to "receive information" or "the teacher gives us".

3.4.2.5 *"It makes it easy for us to collect data, to understand, to analyse the whole thing itself."*

3.4.2.6 *"So if you want to actually understand the course, you have to spend a lot of time on your own, trying to grasp what it is you're being taught."*

3.4.2.7 *"the only way we can understand the topic is if you research into that topic itself."*

A student is someone who "tackles problems".

3.4.2.8 *"So the seminar questions themselves were actually for me a better way of understanding the course, not just reading, not just going to lectures, but actually tackling the problem, and then trying to adapt it into a situation."*

### 3.4.3 The role of the tutor

The tutor is important to the student when the student's own "analysis" results in difficulty. The student can ask the tutor to explain when he/she doesn't understand something.

3.4.3.1 *"So you do need to spend a lot of time learning on your own, and then referring to him in areas you where you don't understand."*

3.4.3.2 *"he spent lots of time trying to explain to people who didn't understand,"*

3.4.3.3 *"he gave us the opportunity of actually sending emails to him. And areas where we didn't understand, he would give us the feedback."*

The tutor can also give the student feedback on the students' ideas to let the student know whether he/she has understood something. The student can find out whether he understands the topic by seeing whether he can engage in a successful dialogue with the tutor on the topic.

3.4.3.4 *"I think the greatest thing, the greatest attribute he wanted us to have was a sort of dialogue within the class itself. Especially when we were carrying out- when we were having seminars, because that is only way we could get to know if we understood what was going on."*

The tutor's feedback shows whether the student's ideas are valid by indicating whether or not they are intelligible.

3.4.3.5 *"I think for me, the best way to learn is more of a face to face kind of thing, because you actually then get to see the person's reaction towards what you are saying, if they understand or not."*

We can perhaps understand "the person" to refer to the tutor, as in quote 3.4.3.6 he seems to say that interaction with other student does not help his learning. Also the use of the word "dialogue" in quote 3.4.3.4 suggests that the seminars entail two-way, rather than multi-way communication.

3.4.3.6 *"And sometimes it's hard to decipher what someone is trying to say. And the explanations you get might not be satisfactory. So, that's why I say that I didn't really get much from fellow students."*

The idea of testing your understanding by finding out whether you can have a dialogue with the tutor, especially in the light of intrinsic motivation indicated in quotes 3.4.4.1, 3.4.4.2 and 3.4.4.4 suggests that for this student ultimately the aim of learning is to be able to take part in the discourse community of that subject. One of the ways that the tutor helps you do this is to give you feedback. Another is to

induct you into the ethos of the subject.

3.4.3.7 *"Basically, economics is not an easy course on its own. You have to be a bit serious about it. He applied that fact of seriousness."*

And another is to put it into a real-world context.

3.4.3.8 *"But he also applied that fact of real life situations, and tried to put that into the way- into our daily lives, kind of thing."*

### 3.4.4 Motivation

Student 2's motivation is to become an economist

3.4.4.1 *"Well, basically as a student I always want to be an economist."*

So minor inconveniences on the course did not bother him.

3.4.4.2 *"Well, for me, it did not really demotivate me. Because I've always had an interest in economics itself."*

The student links motivation to feeling confident (in motivational terms, the experience raised his expectation of success). The use of the word "boost" is interesting as it connotes power, energy; see Timmis and Cook (2002) on motivation as "energy for learning".

3.4.4.3 **Interviewer:** *"OK. In what way did this use of supporting your lecture notes and seminar problems, how did this effect your motivation towards your module?"*

**Student 2:** *"I think it actually boosted my confidence, as students in the class because there are some questions which you actually couldn't understand what to do until he actually showed you the layout."*

This was perhaps particularly important because it made him feel that his ambition to become an economist was realisable.

3.4.4.4 *"It gave me some kind of a- it reaffirmed my ambition, or my desire to- aspiration to actually pursue that."*

### 3.4.5 Independent learning

This student described himself as an independent learner, by which he seems to mean someone who studies on their own.

3.4.5.1 *"So we all have to learn how to research, and how to manage our time, and how to learn on our own."*

In quote 3.4.5.2, independent here seems to mean independent of other learners. However this echoes the structure of the question, which may be interpreted as setting independent learning as an alternative to, and therefore exclusive of, being part of a team.

3.4.5.2 **Interviewer:** *"OK, how would you describe your role? The examples I have here are independent learner, part of team, researcher? What was your role?"*

**Student 2:** *"I am more- independent learner, studying on my own. Because when you study as a group, you tend to have people- misunderstandings within the group itself."*

But he does not seem to mean independent of the tutor.

3.4.5.3 *"An independent learner. But [tutor's name] did contribute to it a great deal towards my understanding of the course itself, because without him I wouldn't have achieved the level and understanding I have right now."*



3.4.5.4 **Interviewer:** *“Next one: We didn’t need a tutor in this course.”*

**Student 2:** *“Strongly disagree.”*

**Interviewer:** *“Can you tell me why?”*

**Student 2:** *“I think most of us would agree that without [the tutor’s] help within the module itself, it would have been quite difficult, if not impossible.”*

Note that here however he invokes “most of us” to support his argument - suggesting he’s not sure of his ground, but this may simply be because he’s having to justify an answer that disagrees with the statement and is thus the dispreferred response to it.

### 3.4.6 Collaborative learning

Collaborative learning; learning in groups and learning from other learners is not this student’s preferred way of working:

3.4.6.1 *“I am a more of an independent learner than anything else. And sometimes it’s hard to decipher what someone is trying to say. And the explanations you get might not be satisfactory. So, that’s why I say that I didn’t really get much from fellow students.”*

The “and” in “and the explanations” suggest that this is a separate reason from the preceding “sometimes it’s hard”. So he seems to be saying that not only is what people are saying unintelligible (echoing his test of learning being whether people can understand you in quote 3.4.3.4), but also that is “not satisfactory”, and if this means something different (“and”) perhaps means “wrong”, “not correct” or perhaps “incomplete”, suggesting that he doesn’t trust what other students say about the subject, that only the tutor is worth listening to.

He does however go on to qualify this, but the “actually” seems to mark the help received from other students as exceptional.

3.4.6.2 *“But there were certain aspects within the module that they actually helped me out.”*

In quote 3.4.6.3 he suggests that this preference is because of previous experiences. The “someone else” was presumably him.

3.4.6.3 *“I prefer learning on my own than to be a part of a group, because I’ve had experiences where the group members weren’t as motivated as I am, or they relied on someone else to do the work for them. So it kind of drew me back. So I prefer learning on my own.”*

So his dislike of collaborative work appears to be based on a belief that other learners can’t be trusted a) to say intelligible things b) to be correct or c) to do their share of the work.

### 3.4.7 The teacher and his authority

There is an implicit trust in the teacher’s authority and knowledge.

3.4.7.1 *“he already has a PhD in economics, so he should know what’s best.”*

The student’s attitude to the tutor is further evidenced by his response to the interviewers questions about something that went badly.

The interviewer asks several questions on this topic that the student did his best to avoid answering, by saying it was the universities fault, by minimizing the effect of the bad thing, of focusing on things he liked. Until finally the exchange quoted in 3.4.7.2.occurred:

3.4.7.2 **Interviewer:** *“ok, how would you describe the tutors role on this occasion of him posting the lecture notes up after his lecture?”*

**Student 2:** *“can we just say it wasn’t his fault anyway because.....”*

**Interviewer:** *“no, well I am not saying it was his fault I am just saying you know what was his role again.”*

It seemed he wanted to conclude the discussion about what went wrong. “Can we just say...” makes it clear that’s all he wants to say about it. He seems to interpret the question as being implicitly critical of the tutor. The interviewer’s denial makes it clear that she understood the student’s response in this way; the student seems to feel uncomfortable with this implicit criticism

The student seems to view the tutor as someone whose qualifications and position lend him an authority that should not be questioned.

### 3.4.8 Online discussion

He does not place a high value on online discussions

**3.4.8.1** *“I think for me, the best way to learn is more of a face to face kind of thing, because you actually then get to see the persons reaction towards what you are saying, if they understand or not. So online discussions are good, but they are kind of informative – they are informal. If you want to actually learn, I think the best way is to be in an environment itself that is conducive to that, which online chat rooms or whatever don’t provide.”*

It is interesting that he chose to describe the place where on line discussion takes place as a “chat room” rather than a “discussion board” (we do not know whether a chat room was available on this course although a discussion board certainly was). Since “chat” connotes a more trivial type of interaction than “discussion”, perhaps this is indicative of how the student views online communication. In any case, he clearly sees online communication as not conducive to learning, because you cannot “see” whether or not “people “ have understood you.

In quote 3.4.8.2 he also chooses to use the term “chat room” even though the interviewer has used “discussion board”.

**3.4.8.2 Interviewer:** *“In what ways was WebCt used to communicate about the lecture notes?”*

**Student 2:** *“What way?”*

**Interviewer:** *“For example- through the discussion board? Or announcements?”*

**Student 2:** *“No, most of the time, he would bring up issues within the class itself, and we were told that we had chat rooms to discuss any problems we may have within the course itself, so that was the other means of communicating with not only him, but also other students in the class. He also had, I think he had – no, that’s the extent to which I went anyway, that chat rooms and stuff.”*

He also says “we were told that we had” rather than “we had”. The sense here is that he did not feel a sense of ownership or belonging towards the “chat room”. Even though he had been told this he did not necessarily feel it to be the case. He seems to be saying “the chat room was put in front of us but I didn’t really put myself into it”. It seems to distance him from the chat room. The phrase “that’s the extent to which I went” is very vague in terms of what he actually did. Does it mean “that’s all I was aware of “? Or “that’s all I used”? What perhaps is disguised is that student 2 did not use the chat room himself. Perhaps the reason that he doesn’t say this outright is that he believes he was expected to use it.

### 3.4.9 Summary

Student 2 has a rather different view of the role of the course materials than the role described by the tutor – seeing them as a launch pad for his own investigation, rather than as a definitive account of the subject. He puts himself at the centre of his own learning, describing his role as very active, as an analyser and researcher. He sees the teacher more as a (very valuable and authoritative) resource, but learning is still very much about what he does rather than what the tutor does. His intrinsic motivation to be an economist positions the tutor as a role model of someone to aspire to converse with as an equal, and that seems to be the aim of his learning. In general he does not see other learners as contributing to this, and in fact there is a suggestion that he does not see them as his



equal. He sees electronic communication as perhaps rather trivial and not, in contrast with the tutor's view, as a place where the tutor is, although he does value the 1 to 1 communication enabled by email.

### 3.5 Student 3

#### 3.5.1 The role of content and his role as a provider of content

Student 3 seems to be more teacher-centred in his attitudes towards learning. This is echoed in his comments about the lecture notes:

*3.5.1.1 "I think the best I can get is the lecture notes and seminar answers. It helped me to understand the topic, just very clear listed out."*

Similar to the tutor, he believes that the way the information is structured is the key to understanding – there is no mention of his own process of interrogating the text or his own role of actively making sense of it.

#### 3.5.2 expert questioners, rather than providers of answers

*3.5.2.1 "I think he expected every one to look at it, maybe before the lecture, because it helps you understand, and because there is not enough time in the seminar to show- to explain all the answers, so if he put in the WebCT, so it can explain very well."*

The word explain positions the student as a passive consumer of knowledge that has to be explained (by the tutor – who is central). This compares to student 2 who understands, analyses, researches.

*3.5.2.2 "I think it is quite excellent, because from other module I didn't have WebCT - I didn't get so many things from the tutor. And I need to copy a lot, but in this module I just need to print it out, and didn't need to do many things."*

WebCT was a way for him to get things from the tutor. As a result of having it in this module he didn't need to copy, he didn't need to do many things. This again positions him as passive – this is all you need to do, and the less you do the better it is. Compare with the tutor's comments about students learning more if they listen during lectures rather than writing notes, and student 2 who saw the notes as guidelines providing a starting point for his own work.

#### 3.5.3 From oracle and lecturer to consultant, guide, and resource provider

He strongly disagreed with the statement "We didn't need a tutor for this course."

*3.5.3.1 "Because listen what the tutor said is better than reading."*

This may simply be an expression of his preferred learning style (listening over reading), but also seems to echo the tutor's own: "sit down, listen to what I say" and as such very much emphasises the authority of the tutor as oracle and lecturer.

#### 3.5.4 Collaborative learning

This student said that WebCT had not encouraged him to feel part of a group and he had not learnt a lot from discussions with fellow students, but that working in WebCT is all about working on your own.

The reasons he gave for this suggested that he felt that there was no need or value in having discussions as part of learning.

*3.5.4.1 "Because I think this module is just about learning something that is related to the module, but there's no need any discussion on something."*

3.5.4.2 *"Because apart from the discussion group, there is no need to have other people, so you just doing things by yourself."*

3.5.4.3 *"Because not a lot of students involved in discussion. So some students who discuss- I think is not very relevant to the module."*

3.5.4.4 *"Because I think it is just independent job, just discussion necessary for group of people."*

He seems to be saying that the messages he read on the discussion board were not relevant to his learning.

### **3.5.5 Summary**

So this student's view of learning is as something he does by listening to the teacher's explanation and working on his own. The teacher seems to be central to learning and learning is more about what the teacher does ("explain") than what the learner does. An active student involvement in interaction is not something he seems to value or see the point of.

## **3.6 Conclusions**

It seems that the attitudes expressed both overtly and implicitly within these interviews can be described by the word ambivalence.

If we look back at the changes of pedagogy that Goodyear (2001) expected to see in a networked learning environment (see 1.1.2) we can see that some of the characteristics they expect to see are present, however it's very difficult to see the extent to which networked learning is responsible for this.

The tutor saw himself more as a provider of answers than an expert questioner, whereas student 1 saw the tutor as an expert guide or giver of tips, and student 2 as an expert interlocutor.

Precreated content was still seen as important, tho' WebCT enabled the tutor to enhance his role as resource provider. The structure of work was actually strongly emphasised by this tutor, but students 1 and 2 saw this in Goodyear's terms as an initial launchpad from which to direct their own learning. Neither the tutor nor students saw the teacher-learner power structures erode, and all placed the tutor firmly in the centre of the learning and teaching experience.

Where the tutor still sees students to a large extent as passive recipients of "information", Students 1 and 2 saw themselves as active creators of their own knowledge. Student 3 still apparently saw himself in a passive role. Student 2 eloquently described his role as a processor of knowledge rather than a memoriser of facts, and how the online resources facilitated this approach. He also described how he formulated his own questions, but generally would still look to the tutor for the answers rather than searching for them himself. There was little evidence of a change towards more collaborative or group work, although the tutor did have some wish for this. Both tutor and all students made claims for the students becoming more independent, but in the tutor's case this was expressed in terms of the benefits for himself, and for the students it seemed to mean being independent of other students, but not necessarily of the tutor.

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## 4. Discussion and conclusions

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### 4.1 Introduction

Chapters 2 and 3 outlined the main empirical basis of our analysis, the findings for which were summarised there. This chapter seeks to find ways to draw those findings together, and reflects on the study itself. The three ways we have found to draw our findings together are to consider what is meant by 'discussion', to consider participation in a discussion board as a risk decision, and to think explicitly about the three research questions we were asked to address.

### 4.2 'Discussion'

'Discussion' is a key term. It is used in the interviews with tutors and students, on the discussion board, as the title of the 'discussion board', by the VLE manufacturers, by the SOLE researchers, by professionals and academics working within the constructivist approach and, finally, it is used in ordinary casual conversation where we all know what it means. So, what does it mean? The OED gives two definitions:

1. a conversation, especially on specific subjects; a debate
2. an examination by argument, written or spoken

#### 4.2.1 Definition 1

In respect of the first OED definition, empirical work on natural conversation (Psathas 1995; Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974) has shown it to be structured according to a well-defined set of normative rules which imply a degree of mutuality and collaboration.

We could define mutuality as meaning "I expect that the way you respond to what I say will largely parallel the way I intend to respond to what you say", rather than us having pre-allocated roles that would determine the style or content of how you respond. For example I might expect you to make a statement of agreement or disagreement, then qualify this, and I would do the same. The point may be further illustrated if we contrast it with an interaction pattern not typified by mutuality (asymmetric interaction), for example the question – response – evaluation pattern common in classroom settings, where the teacher would typically expect to respond to what the student says by evaluating it, and the student to what the teacher says by writing it down.

By collaboration in this context we would imply a sense of freely working towards a common goal (e.g. a greater understanding of the topic), where the participants have more or less equal status with respect to the current activity.

We would argue that the use of the word 'discussion' to describe what happens on the discussion board may set up an expectation that what will happen is a 'conversation' (in the sense described above). However our examination of the "discussion board" in this study shows that in this example this was not the case.

#### 4.2.2 Definition 2

Similarly, the second OED definition of discussion, an examination by argument, would suggest that the relevant rules are of elaboration rather than interaction and turn-taking. That is, contributions are expected to be more fully-formed than turns in a conversation. You are now reading such a 'discussion'. People coming to the discussion board with expectations based on this definition would anticipate having to read and write extended expositions. Some students in the SOLE study expressed disappointment in the quality of postings to the discussion board, and this suggests that they might have been interpreting 'discussion' in this way.

### 4.2.3 Genre confusion again

These two definitions of 'discussion' do not refer to the same phenomenon. The expectations that they give rise to will lead to people having incompatible approaches to using a 'discussion board'. Findings from the ReproMed study confirm this (Jenkins et al 2001), where some participants expressed disappointment in others' 'exam-type answers' (definition 2, above), as they had been hoping for a more interactional approach to the online activities (definition 1, above). The use of the term 'discussion board' is ambiguous and, unless the ambiguity is resolved somehow, then the conflicting expectations it gives rise to will hamper the use of discussion boards in online learning.

## 4.3 Risk

We wondered whether we could use our findings to inform an imagined 'cost-benefit' risk assessment that a student might make in deciding whether or not to post a message to the discussion board. In deciding whether or not to participate (that is, in this case, post a message), each student had a number of factors to consider, including:

1. the student's (assumed) voluntaristic decision to take the course;
2. the student's desire to pass the course (see results from motivation part of questionnaire- 85% wanted to get good marks in the assessment, by far the most significant motivator);
3. the tutor's explicit calls for participation (see, for example, messages 96, 114, 121);
4. the student's familiarity with online discussion (80% had not used WebCT before this module, and only 28% expressed confidence in taking part in online discussions);
5. the confusing and contradictory discursive (genre) context (see sections 4.3 and 4.4, above);
6. fear of looking foolish (see message 114);
7. the fact that English was not a first language for many students;
8. cultural background and expectations;
9. the student's understanding of the learning model being used by the tutor;
10. the student's preferred learning style.

A simple model of risk works along two axes, (i) how likely is there to be a cost or benefit? and (ii) how great would that cost or benefit be?

### 4.3.1 Risk: likelihood of cost

How might a student have assessed the likelihood of there being a cost associated with participating in the discussion board? From the above list of factors, we might identify two potential costs:

- a. Sanction (formal or informal) due to the student breaking normative rules of interaction in the discussion board. This could arise because of the student's unfamiliarity with English (language and/or interactional conventions), their unfamiliarity with online discussion, difficulties arising from the genre issues, or their unfamiliarity with the expressed or implicit learning model. Given this long list, we might conclude that a student would assess the chances of her/him inadvertently doing something interactionally wrong, or inappropriate to the ongoing activity, were high.
- b. Negative impact on whether the student will pass the course / assessment. This would only arise if participation in the discussion board counted toward the assessment. The tutor makes it clear (if nowhere else) in message 122 that this is not the case (see 2.4.1).

#### 4.3.2 Risk: likelihood of benefit

How might a student have assessed the likelihood of there being benefits associated with participating in the discussion board? From the above list of factors, we might identify two potential benefits:

- a. An improved comprehension of macroeconomics. The tutor explicitly described one of the aims of the discussion board as to “help you get a better understanding of macroeconomics” (message 108). In assessing whether participation would benefit them in this respect, students would have weighed this explicit statement against other factors. In fact, two of the three students interviewed denied that online peer-peer discussion would help their learning (see chapter 3).
- b. Positive impact on whether the student will pass the course / assessment. This would only arise if participation in the discussion board counted toward the assessment. The tutor makes it clear (if nowhere else) in message 122 that this is not the case (see 2.4.1).

#### 4.3.3 Risk: extent of cost

How might a student have assessed the extent of any possible costs associated with participating in the discussion board? From 4.3.1:

- a. Sanction (formal or informal) due to the student breaking normative rules of interaction in the discussion board. The cost of such a sanction would vary according to a number of factors, for example, the student's personality, cultural background<sup>11</sup>, level of unfamiliarity with the discursive environment of the discussion board. However, public sanction or looking foolish are things that most people take some trouble to avoid.
- b. Negative impact on whether the student will pass the course / assessment. Given that most students noted that passing the assessment was their major motivator, then any negative impact on this could be expected to be perceived as serious.

#### 4.3.4 Risk: extent of benefit

How might a student have assessed the extent of any possible benefits associated with participating in the discussion board? From 4.3.2:

- a. An improved comprehension of macroeconomics. Only 40% of the students claimed in the questionnaire that an interest in the subject was a key motivator, less than half the number that rated the assessment as a key motivator. We might conclude that this benefit was not central to many students. Furthermore, interviewed students noted that this benefit might be had by following others' discussions ('lurking'<sup>12</sup>), ironically a related phenomenon is well-known in economic theory, where it is called 'freeloading'.
- b. Positive impact on whether the student will pass the course / assessment. This would only arise if participation in the discussion board counted toward the assessment. The tutor makes it clear (if nowhere else) in message 122 that this is not the case (see 2.4.1).

Summarising the above, it would seem that the anticipated benefits for students participating in the discussion board were potentially small and unlikely, whereas the anticipated costs may have been significant and were certainly likely (or, at least, their likelihood was unknown and might be estimated as high).

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<sup>11</sup> We might also add here that looking foolish has potentially more serious implications in some communities than others. For example, in a discussion board for junior doctors, in which consultants were observers, a junior doctor might have a great deal to lose by demonstrating that s/he was unaware of the rules or substance of the interaction.

<sup>12</sup> This is a controversial word, discussed further below.

A similar analysis might be undertaken (but is not, to avoid too much repetition) for the student's decision to 'lurk'. Lurking is seen in fairly negative terms within constructivist and collaborative orthodoxies, where participation is valued highly. It seems to be the case that 'lurking' is not seen by many educational professionals in as positive a light as a possible offline equivalent; listening attentively (Davis 1995). This view appears to be carried through to the SOLE research agenda, especially the interview schedules (see Chapter 3, and below). However, some of the students saw value in following a discussion without contributing ("when I read other students' discussions, I think it gave good motivation to me" Interview with S). In any case, it would appear that, for most of the students, the incentives offered by the discussion board, the subject, the course and the tutor were insufficient for them to value participation (posting messages) over lurking, and therefore that the factors described in 4.3.1a and 4.3.3a were important.

## 4.4 The research questions

The following research questions were part of the original research questions for the SOLE study and as such, were also specified for this study:

- ◆ How do students choose to communicate (how? when? why?) and for what purposes? How do the VLE tools support this?
- ◆ Who is/what is the role of the tutor? What is the role of the student? How do these relate to the implicit, explicit, actual model of learning? And to student participation in the VLE?
- ◆ Are we able to identify issues around authority (of knowledge; of expertise; teacher-student communications) in relation to VLEs?

These will now be examined in turn:

### 4.4.1 How do students choose to communicate?

On the whole, students did not choose to communicate using the discussion board. We have analysed the reasons for this in the preceding sections of this chapter. We do not have sufficient data to comment on other media that they may have used, or their reactions to those media.

### 4.4.2 What are the roles of the student and the tutor?

Zimmerman (1998) describes three levels of identity, which we might usefully consider in relations to roles. These are:

- a. The discourse identity is that role in which a participant is acting in the moment, for example, questioner, respondent, present-but-not-addressed. People move in and out of these roles as interaction proceeds;
- b. The situational identity is that role that arises as a result of the type of activity that is underway, such as interviewer;
- c. The transportable identity points to those elements of a person's identity that they carry with them from activity to activity, and that are easily visible, for example, being black, or old, or young.

This study focuses on situational identities, with discourse and transportable identities as relevant contexts. That is because we have been concerned with the level of activity types and hence of genre. We found from analyses of both the interviews and the discussion board data that participants in this module displayed what we have called 'genre tension' (Chapter 2) and 'ambivalence' (Chapter 3). How can we understand this? We would like to consider this in terms of Bernstein's 'recontextualising fields', which describe how external discourses (in the form of expectations, constraints, etc) are manifested in practice. The fields that we can identify from our analyses are:

- a. The pedagogic discourse of **learner-centred education**, as described by Goodyear above;

- b. The 'official' discourse of **elearning** (Robertson forthcoming), which includes reference to (a), resulting in expectations such as "we are using a discussion board therefore students should be discussing" (but see section 4.2 above), and "we are putting materials online therefore students will be more independent";
- c. The discourse of **knowledge transmission**, which describes knowledge as something to be conveyed from knower to learner, and is congruent with subjects that emphasise factual knowledge as a fixed system (for example, some branches of economics, natural science, engineering), rather than as a matter of construction, co-construction or interpretation (for example philosophy, sociology, literary studies);
- d. The institutional discourse of summative assessment, standards, and **accountability**, by which both tutors and students are judged.

These four fields can be understood as pulling actors in potentially different directions, or as competing for influence within a particular activity or episode of practice. Much of the data we have analysed can be understood in terms of the ways in which the activities variously instantiate these four fields. For example, this helps us understand the delicate discursive work necessary in the interaction about assessment between the tutor and student<sup>7</sup> (see 2.4.2), where the tutor is positioned by the student as representing the assessing institution (accountability), which the tutor resists while maintaining his stance as "knower" (transmission) but yet also positioning himself as the students' guide or mentor (learner centred education). Another similar example (see 2.4.1) is where the tutor threatens to fail students who do not participate in the discussion board, thereby again revealing the difficulties in trying simultaneously to work under the constraints of accountability (d) and learner-centred elearning (a) and (b)<sup>13</sup>.

#### 4.4.3 What are the issues of authority?

The model presented in section 4.4.2 applies equally to the related issues of roles and authority, for example:

- ◆ The students do not trust each others' authority (they see the tutor as having a monopoly on expertise – 'transmission'), so that peer-peer discussion ('learner-centred') on the discussion board ('elearning') was not seen as valuable; they would not value each others' contributions.
- ◆ The tutor did not really trust the students' capacity to learn the subject in their own way ('learner-centred'), pushing him into a role as the authoritative source and structurer of knowledge ('transmission').
- ◆ The authority of the institution in mandating assessment of certain kinds positions the tutor in the role of an agent of the assessing body.
- ◆ The tutor saw one of the benefits of using WebCT as fostering learner independence ('learner-centred'), but actually his motivation for this seemed to be to deal more efficiently with large numbers of students ('accountability')

The data are permeated with similar examples, suggesting that the model we have presented is robust and widely applicable within this case study. At the level of individual choices (for example, whether or not to participate), the recontextualising fields may be analysed as risk factors, or as the context for risk-relevant decisions, as discussed above. That is, as we have described it above, people find it difficult to interact effectively in a situation where it is not clear which genres are appropriate, that is, which fields are in play. Of course, as Robertson (forthcoming) describes, similar issues arise in face-to-face classroom interaction, and she points to evidence of related discursive activities.

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<sup>13</sup> In fact, in our data, elearning and learner-centred education are very difficult to distinguish as distinct fields. This is interesting, given that conceptually and historically they are quite distinct. It would appear that they are easy (perhaps too easy) to conflate in practice.

## 4.5 Roles in interviews / SOLE

There was evidence that the SOLE interviews contained a strong preference for constructivist / collaborative / learner-centred learning models, and that this positioned the tutor as disguising (or avoiding emphasising) teaching practices that perhaps did not 'live up to' these models. Dyadic exchanges such as research interviews are known to produce these kinds of effect, wherein the interviewee subtly resists or negotiates the way they are being positioned by the interviewer (see Widdicombe 1998). This can be done in a number of ways, including delayed responses, answers that re-specify the questions or display the non-shared assumptions therein, and tactical uses of agency (active / passive voice, and so on). We found all of these to be present in the interviews with the tutor.

**4.5.1.1 Interviewer:** *"So it's hard when you talked about posting your online discussion are you expecting students to be talking to each other about these issues, or just talking to you about them?"*

**Tutor:** *"No, I mean the idea is for them to talk to each other, and maybe talk to me, but to talk to each other, mainly. The idea of hosting the discussion topics is also one of creating a kind of community if possible,"*

Quote 4.6.1.1 (see 3.2.6 for a fuller analysis of this exchange) is an illustrative example of this, where implicit in the question is an assumption that students talking to each other (learner centredness) is somehow more or better than "just" talking to the tutor. The tutor's response is marked by hesitation and contradiction, suggesting that he is faced with composing a dispreferred response that requires an explanation (see 3.2.6 for further examples from this same question/answer sequence). The tutor responds to this difficulty by (a) de-emphasising his own agency ("the unit requires") and (b) exaggerating the extent to which his response conforms to the implicit assumption of the question and (c) disguising the extent to which it does not.

Another example of where the tutor's response seems strongly influenced by a concern about being evaluated by the interviewer is in 4.6.1.2 below:

**4.5.1.2 INT:** *"OK. What kinds of support do you anticipate offering students using WebCT? What kind of support would they have for using WebCT?"*

**TUTOR:** *"Mmm. You mean in terms of web support, what support they should expect?"*

The question presupposes that support will be given – making it more marked if the tutor was to say "actually no we don't give any support". First the tutor seems uncertain how to answer the question and tries to renegotiate it through clarifying the meaning of the word 'support' (this maybe also be a result of working in a second language, but also because 'support' has a specific meaning in this context).

**4.5.1.3 INT:** *"From anyone."*

**TUTOR:** *"From anyone?"*

**INT:** *"Anyone related to the module in using WebCT. So do you give them support, or do they get technical support? What kind of support?"*

**TUTOR:** *"Oh gosh, we come out really badly from this. I don't give them any support, I have to say. It's really bad. No, I don't give any support,"*

The tutor's response almost seems quite guilty, as if he's failed in some way. Interestingly when he starts thinking about the question he lists several ways in which he does give students support..

**4.5.1.4** *" in the sense that in week one, which was last week, I told them about the website, I told them how to look in on WebCT, and I told them the basic procedure. I mean everything is quite easily set up on the website, once they go on on the university WebCT page, and there are instructions on what they need to do and understand. And if they have problems I told them there are two ways in which to . one is they can e-mail me, and contact me, or tell me in the class, and I will show them how to go about it. The other help is the central kind of help, where the university, in the [IT building], which is that building there..."*



Just as the students were concerned about their assessment, and this affected how they (non-)participated in the discussion board, so the tutor might be thought to be experiencing 'evaluation apprehension' in the interviews. He appears to know what the 'right' answer is (because he constructs his answers as if they were dispreferred), and needs to explain why he occasionally does not give it. We have not speculated about the reasons behind the tutor's apparent need to disguise or apologise for a more teacher-centred approach than that implied by the interviewer, although we would note the power relations inherent in an interview situation (Houtkoop-Steenstra 2000). However, if this dualistic thinking (learner-centred good / teacher-centred bad) extended beyond the interview situation to the tutor's approach to the course, we might ask whether it was helpful. We have suggested that the tutor's tentative approach to collaborative learning was one reason why the discussion board did not work as he had hoped. If he had felt able to adopt the structured and teacher-centred approach that perhaps he (and some students) considered appropriate, then the discussion board failure might not have happened (or might not have been a failure).

We might also ask whether this kind of dualistic thinking (learner-centred good / teacher-centred bad) is helpful in planning and implementing a research project, or a sub-study such as this within a research project. For example, one of the research questions we were asked to focus on was "how do students choose to communicate?" (see also 1.3.1). This is a good illustration of what Fairclough (1989) called 'presupposition', where certain facts have to be assumed before the question can be answered. In this case, the assumptions include that students communicate, that they should communicate, and that they have a choice over how they communicate. All of these assumptions might be challenged from both a research and a pedagogic perspective. As research assumptions, we might ask whether (as seemed to be the case), they orient the fieldwork and the analysis toward the learner-centred orthodoxy. As pedagogic assumptions, we might ask the extent to which this orthodoxy successfully accounts for behaviour such as 'lurking' that students describe as having positive learning effects (see 4.3.4 above).

This is not to say that the SOLE research, or this sub-study within it, is fatally flawed. The research approach and research questions were ratified by robust procedures (in which one of the authors was heavily involved), including a steering group of senior academics and practitioners in the area. The research questions were bound to include presupposition of some kind – research cannot start from scratch every time. The point is rather that the opportunity for reflection that has been deliberately built into the SOLE project has allowed a degree of self-awareness that includes, but certainly extends well beyond, this discourse analysis study. The SOLE research is stronger, not weaker, for it.

## **4.6 Concluding remarks**

This report has described a discourse analysis of a set of data relating to one particular module. It has suggested a number of ways in which the discourse on display could be understood, with particular reference to genre, risk and a reflexive attitude to pedagogy and research. While we have uncovered much from the case study data, we suggest that there is much left to uncover, and that further work could be justified. Perhaps easier to justify, though, might be extending this analysis to other case studies. This analysis has shown the value of a case study approach, where the surprisingly extensive implications of apparently small details can be studied in depth. However, this would be much enhanced if other similar studies were conducted on other modules, so that methods, results and reflections could be compared and further insights gleaned from that comparison.

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## Appendix 1

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In Chapter 2 we assumed that two messages that appeared as the first messages in the discussion board record were, in fact, not part of the 2003 module sequence because they were dated 2001. However, there is the possibility that these two messages were seen by students who understood them to be part of the 2003 discussion board. For example, the tutor may have deliberately left them there as introductions to the discussion board, or they may not have been deleted by the WebCT system administrator. In this appendix, we analyse these two messages as if they were the first messages in the 2003 sequence. The numbers in square brackets are paragraph numbers to aid reference from the analysis text.

**Message no. 1**

Posted by [TUTOR] on Tuesday, February 6, 2001 7:35pm

**Subject introduction**

[1] Dear all,

[2] The Help and Support topic has been set up with the aim of providing a forum where you can ask questions or present some problems concerning the topics and issues covered in the module.

[3] The questions can concern, for example, the solution of a particular problem, or the explanation of a particular concept, or the details concerning the material available for the module.

[4] You are invited both to post your problems and to suggest solutions to other students who have emailed some question.

[5] Your lecturer will keep an eye on this discussion list and will provide answers if needed.

[6] Hope you will find it helpful.

[7] [tutor], Module Leader

This is the first message posted to the discussion board and, as might be expected, it is an attempt to set out what activities will take place there. Comments follow:

- [1] This greeting addresses the students as a group, as if making an announcement to a group (as is reasonable from the tutor's point of view). However, it clearly places the tutor at the 'front of the class', where the class is a discrete and undifferentiated unit. Any student reading this is being addressed as a member of this unit.
- [2] The discussion board is described as a 'help and support topic', where students can present problems or questions. This would appear to resemble the 'clinic' function, although clinic consultations are generally private, whereas the discussion board is a public forum (at least, within this group). The sentence is in the passive voice, effectively hiding responsibility for setting it up - was it the module leader?
- [3] There are examples of the kind of question or problem that the tutor anticipates and is suggesting as appropriate for the discussion board.
- [4] 'You are invited' is a formal style, suggesting the invitation may be (only) formal, or requires only formal responses. Furthermore, 'you are invited' is in the passive voice, effectively hiding who the invitation is from. Only at this point does the tutor suggest that peer-peer interaction might be appropriate, and this to suggest solutions to others' problems, so that 'questions' and 'problems' seem to be being conflated.
- [5] The tutor now will only 'keep an eye' on the discussion board, and only provide answers 'if needed'. This is a long way from the activity implied in paragraph [2]. The way this is phrased

is very unusual, if we assume that the 'lecturer' and the 'module leader' are the same person (as they were in 2003). Having 'your lecturer' as the agent seems to do at least two things. First, it distances the author of the message from the actions described here ('keep an eye', 'provide answers'). This would seem to be in keeping with paragraph [4] and, indeed, the rest of the message. Second, taking a fake third-person voice (that is, Neil saying 'Neil will do it' instead of 'I will do it') is readily heard in English culture as being the way in which adults occasionally speak to children. We don't want to push this observation too far, but merely flag it as potentially significant.

Overall, then, this message conveys three ideas about the rules for the discussion board. First, that the tutor is central. Second, that peer-peer interaction is allowed. Third, that a formal style may be appropriate. However, none of these issues are described explicitly, and inexperienced students are unlikely to have the background knowledge of HE pedagogy to be able to interpret them adequately. The other significant idea that this message puts forward is that the tutor is only ambiguously present online. He may or may not have set up the discussion board, may or may not be the person inviting them to post messages, and may or may not be the person who will keep an eye on the discussion and answer questions where necessary. This puts recipients of this message in a very difficult position; who are they responding to?

If we are to believe the discussion board record, the next message was posted by the tutor some four minutes later, with the same subject line:

**Message no. 2**

Posted by [TUTOR] on Tuesday, February 6, 2001 7:39pm

**Subject introduction**

[1] Dear all,

[2] I have set up this discussion list with the aim of collecting your opinions and comments about the module.

[3] Please feel free to send your comments about the module and about the web site. Both negative and positive comments are welcome as long as they are constructive.

[4] Your emails will be seen by everybody and hopefully will stimulate a positive debate.

[5] Hope to hear from you. Thanks.

[6] [tutor], Module Leader

This message has the same subject line as Message 1, and appears to have the same goal, of introducing the discussion board. However, there are yet further ideas about the rules for interacting:

- [1] This greeting is not neutral, see above
- [2] This time (in contrast to message 1 above, the tutor is explicit that he set up the discussion list, the explicit aim of which is to 'collect' opinions and comments about the module. This suggests strongly that the tutor is looking for evaluative comments about the teaching, learning and materials, rather than substantive contributions about economics. This contradicts much of Message 1. It also acts as a kind of category entitlement; the tutor is in a role where he can set up systems to collect feedback, and this suggests that he is entitled to receive feedback. It also suggests that there will be very little role for the tutor on the discussion board, and that there is little scope for discussion (either with him or between the students).
- [3] This reiterates and strengthens paragraph 2.
- [4] The public nature of the discussion board is described as an opportunity for debate that, following from paragraphs [2] and [3], should be about the module delivery and not about economics. However, [2] and [3] do not suggest any role for debate, positive or otherwise, since all the tutor is asking for is feedback on the module.
- [5] This is an informal request for contributions, of the style used in casual emails and notes, which

contrasts strongly with the style of invitation used in Message 1.

Already, then, by the end of Message 2, the tutor has outlined a range of potential uses for the discussion board (not all of which are entirely compatible), and a range of styles that are appropriate for contributions (again, not all of which are compatible). Furthermore, there is no mention of how the discussion board relates to the rest of the module, except in Message 2, where it is described as somewhere for the students to evaluate it. The students therefore have been invited by their 'Module leader' to participate in a forum, but not given clear guidance on the aims or rules for their participation.