Abstract

This research identifies and studies the techniques and strategies used by New Zealand tertiary tutors in the process of encouraging participation, and ultimately learning, when using online asynchronous discussion forums. The last decade has seen considerable growth in online learning and the discussion forum now features as a mainstream teaching tool in both fully online courses and in blended delivery. Of interest are the strategies tutors use in online discussion forums: exactly how do tutors encourage an online class to participate and engage in meaningful discourse in a textual asynchronous communication medium?

Twelve New Zealand tertiary tutors were interviewed in a semi-structured manner, gathering both demographic data and data from open-ended questions. The open-ended questions were designed to ascertain the tutors’ perceptions about the pedagogical considerations of online learning, the barriers students may face and the techniques the tutors use to compensate for these barriers. The results were analysed using qualitative methods, summarised and discussed.

The study shows that a number of the tutors interviewed used a range of strategies across both the affective and cognitive domains, and these tutors were aware of which barriers their strategies are targeting. Where a narrow selection of strategies was used it was apparent that some of the barriers to participation were not being addressed.
Acknowledgments

A number of people have motivated, supported and in some cases cajoled me before and during this thesis. In no particular order, except chronological, I’d like to acknowledge the following people. My grandmother who instilled in her grandchildren a love of literature and a questioning mind, my parents for showing me anything is possible, my wife and children for their patient support and understanding, my line manager who encouraged me to go ahead with a Masters degree and my work colleagues who have listened to and advised me on multiple occasions.

Thank you also to the tutors who participated in the interviews that provided the data for this research, without your time and interest this would not have been possible.

I now appreciate the role of thesis supervisors, and would like to thank Donald Joyce for not only his incredible patience and honesty but also his persistence and attention to detail. Ranjana Shukla as my secondary supervisor provided valuable advice on the overall structure of the thesis.
Declaration

Name of candidate: Richard Eric Vaughan Collecutt

This Thesis/Dissertation/Research Project entitled Scaffolding Asynchronous Communication is submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the Unitec degree of Master of Computing

CANDIDATE’S DECLARATION

I confirm that:

• This Thesis/Dissertation/Research Project represents my own work;
• The contribution of supervisors and others to this work was consistent with the Unitec Regulations and Policies.
• Research for this work has been conducted in accordance with the Unitec Research Ethics Committee Policy and Procedures, and has fulfilled any requirements set for this project by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee.

Research Ethics Committee Approval Number: 2007.673

Candidate Signature: ………………………………………….. Date: …………………

Student number: 1208072
Table of Contents

1. Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1
   1.1. Overview .................................................................................................................. 1
   1.2. Background ............................................................................................................. 1
   1.3. Importance of the study .......................................................................................... 1
   1.4. Personal motivation ............................................................................................... 3
   1.5. Target audience ..................................................................................................... 3
   1.6. The research questions ......................................................................................... 3
   1.7. Research method ................................................................................................... 4
   1.8. Limitations of this research ................................................................................. 4
   1.9. Thesis structure ...................................................................................................... 5
   1.10. Summary ............................................................................................................... 6

2. Literature Review ............................................................................................................. 7
   2.1. Introduction ............................................................................................................ 7
   2.2. Pedagogical Principles .......................................................................................... 7
   2.3. Underlying Technology ......................................................................................... 10
   2.4. The Tutor ............................................................................................................. 11
   2.5. The Student ......................................................................................................... 14
   2.6. The Role of the Discussion Forum ....................................................................... 20
   2.7. Subject Matter ...................................................................................................... 20
   2.8. Summary .............................................................................................................. 21

3. Methodology ................................................................................................................... 23
   3.1. Introduction ............................................................................................................ 23
   3.2. Quantitative Research ......................................................................................... 23
   3.3. Qualitative Research ............................................................................................ 24
   3.4. Chosen Research Method ..................................................................................... 25
   3.5. Data Gathering ...................................................................................................... 26
   3.6. Data Analysis ........................................................................................................ 27
   3.7. Summary .............................................................................................................. 27

4. Results .............................................................................................................................. 28
   4.1. Introduction ............................................................................................................ 28
Index of Tables

Table 1: Interview Results ................................................................. 31
Table 2: Barriers to Participation ...................................................... 35
Table 3: Barriers to Learning ............................................................. 36
Table 4: Strategies Used ................................................................. 38
Table 5: Summary of Themes ......................................................... 46
Table 6: All strategies discussed by tutors ......................................... 52
Table 7: Themes discussed by females ............................................. 55
Table 8: Themes discussed by males ............................................... 55
Table 9: Themes from each subject area ......................................... 56
Table 10: Themes discussed by experienced tutors (4 years and greater) .... 57
Table 11: Themes discussed by less experienced tutors (less than 4 years) .... 57
Table 12: Themes most discussed by tutors who felt that forums were important to the way they teach ...................................... 58
Table 13: Themes discussed by tutors for whom discussion forums are equal to other methods in their teaching ................................ 59
Table 14: Themes most discussed by tutors who felt that forums were important in the way students learn .................................. 59
Table 15: Themes discussed by the tutor who felt that forums were equal with other modes of learning ......................................... 60
Table 16: Themes from tutors who taught completely online ...................... 60
Table 17: Themes from tutors who taught partially online ...................... 61
Table 18: Themes discussed by undergraduate diploma level tutors .......... 61
Table 19: Themes discussed by undergraduate degree level tutors ............. 62
Table 20: Themes discussed by postgraduate tutors ................................ 62
Table 21: Themes from tutors with no ESL students ............................. 62
Table 22: Themes from tutors with a small number of ESL students ......... 63
Table 23: Themes from the tutor with a moderate component of ESL students .... 63
Table 24: Themes found for each prime role .................................... 64
Table 25: Themes mentioned by those tutors who run face-to-face introductory teaching sessions ................................................. 65
Table 26: Themes mentioned by those tutors who do not run face-to-face introductory teaching sessions ................................................................. 65
Table 27: Themes from those tutors running icebreakers ................................................. 66
Table 28: Themes from those tutors not running icebreakers ........................................ 66
Table 29: Themes mentioned by the tutor who did not encourage reflective practice 67
Table 30: Themes from tutors that assessed participation ............................................. 68
Table 31: Themes from tutors that did not assess participation ...................................... 68
Table 32: Themes from tutors that assessed contribution .............................................. 69
Table 33: Themes from tutors that did not assess contribution ...................................... 69
Table 34: Matching “barriers to participation” to strategies ........................................ 70
Table 35: Matching “barriers to learning” to strategies .................................................. 72
Table 36: Matching tutors’ individual barriers to strategies ......................................... 74
Table 37: Comparing tutors’ barriers with the literature review barriers ...................... 75
Index of Figures

Figure 1: Pedagogical themes ................................................................. 49
Figure 2: Barrier themes ................................................................. 50
Figure 3: Strategy themes ................................................................. 51
Figure 4: Classification of strategies ........................................... 53
Figure 5: Proportion of strategy groups ........................................ 54
Figure 6: Number of themes compared with online teaching experience .......... 58
Figure 7: Alignment of “barriers to participation” to strategies ............... 71
Figure 8: Alignment of “barriers to learning” to strategies ................. 73
1. Introduction

1.1. Overview

This chapter introduces the research topic and outlines the recent history that leads to the author’s interest in the issues surrounding the research questions. The importance of the study is discussed in relation to modern teaching practices and current theories of learning. The author’s particular interest in the study is put forward and a target audience is identified. The research topic is defined with two research questions, the research method is summarised and limitations of the research are identified. Lastly, an overview of the structure of this document is outlined.

1.2. Background

The increasing expansion and growth of the World Wide Web has seen many innovative adaptations of existing social, scientific and business practices to the new electronic medium. As early as 1997 Anderson and Kanuka (cited by Nachmias, Mioduser, Oren & Ram, 2000, p. 94) noted that the Web’s “potential for supporting collaborative learning processes deserved particular attention among scholars and developers”. Not surprisingly, the delivery of education and training now appears in numerous Internet-based formats (Thomas, 2003, p. 43). Many of these formats now fall under the umbrella of a learning management system (LMS), with the modern LMS offering a wide variety of pedagogical tools with which to deliver learning material and engage the student with the material, the tutor and other students. Of particular interest to the author are the tools that enable interaction among students and between students and the tutor, the approaches that New Zealand tutors take to using these tools and how aware are the tutors of the impacts of diminished participation by students in their use of the tools.

1.3. Importance of the study

One of the goals of the research is to gather information that should enable tutors to share their knowledge of what works well in asynchronous communication and what does not. Much has been written in the literature about the benefits of asynchronous
discussion forums and how well their features map to the modern theories of learning, particularly the constructivist approach.

Recent web-based communication technologies have drawn millions of learners and instructors to their computers to take or teach courses online. Educational quality varies widely. Yet researchers have found that online learning has considerable potential: experiences involving asynchronous, interactive dialogue among learners, facilitated and supported by an instructor, can yield thoughtful and reflective engagement around educational content (Sorenson, 2004, p. 256). Despite this potential, there are some studies that indicate ineffectual learning in discussion forums due to a lack of engagement by the student (Williams & Pury, 2002).

The last five years have seen some research taking place on measuring the effectiveness of discussion forums, mainly in the areas of levels of participation and quality of contributions. What have not been covered are strategies employed by tutors to realise the supposed learning benefits of forums. The study is an attempt at assessing the alignment of pedagogical teaching strategies with an information and communication technology that has moved past an early adoption phase and is now in main-stream use.

A topical issue in the New Zealand tertiary sector concerns the changes in teaching styles required in moving a class from face-to-face delivery to online. While appropriate forms of teacher scaffolding or development will help teachers make a successful transition from face-to-face to online teaching, it is common for teacher development for online teaching to take the form of one-off workshops and technical training sessions. According to Khoo, Forret and Cowie (2005, p. 345) these strategies are unlikely to achieve anything more than superficial pedagogical changes.

Khoo et al. go as far as proposing a strategy and process (negotiated intervention) to assist tutors in the adoption of online course teaching, particularly for courses that have a large component of asynchronous discussion as part of the course design. In addition, tutors have difficulty in achieving meaningful online exchanges between students (Sorenson, 2004, p. 243).
1.4. **Personal motivation**

As a tertiary education tutor in web and internet technologies the author is both interested in the pedagogical benefits of the web-based tools, and in using these tools to leverage teaching and learning. In practice though, the students do not always appear to have the same appreciation of the supposed advantages to learning as proposed in the academic literature. It is the author’s opinion that New Zealand tutors are not using discussion forums to their full potential and consequently a study of exactly how tutors use discussions and the strategies they employ in forums is of interest.

The investigation of exactly how academic research aligns with academic practice in this area and what other tutors in New Zealand are doing to achieve this will benefit the author’s and other tutors’ teaching, and the learning experience of students.

1.5. **Target audience**

The target audience for this research report comprises the academic community in general, those tutors actively using discussion forums in their teaching, students pursuing similar research or study and those tutors contributing via interviews that expressed an interest in seeing a summary of the research results. It is assumed that this target group would be conversant with pedagogical concepts, particularly constructivism and andragogy, and that they would also be “web” literate in terms of using online tools such as discussion forums.

1.6. **The research questions**

This research will scrutinise the role of the tutor in facilitating “asynchronous communication” as it is used in online discussion forums (as opposed to other forms of asynchronous communication, such as email). More specifically, the research will focus on how New Zealand tutors may best attain the benefits (pedagogical among others) ascribed to online discussion forums.
The research questions to be answered are:

1. What techniques do NZ tutors use in discussion forums for online classes?

2. How effective are these techniques in facilitating meaningful discussion?

1.7. Research method

The full research method is described in chapter three. In brief, 12 New Zealand tertiary tutors were interviewed with a series of questions ranging from demographic to open-ended. These questions are shown in appendix A. Each interview was recorded, transcribed and the transcriptions are included in appendix B.

The transcribed interviews were then analysed qualitatively using the software N6 developed by QSR. Themes were identified in the interviews, summarised and grouped into categories. From these were taken the strategies the tutors are employing and also the rationales for the strategies, what the tutors are trying to achieve and what barriers or limiting factors the strategies are linked to.

1.8. Limitations of this research

This research is limited to the tutors’ perceptions about online discussion forums, how they manage, facilitate and use them in an endeavour to maximise student learning. Student experiences and expectations of the forums are not investigated directly, except to the extent that their attitudes and experiences are reported back to the tutors and in turn influence what the tutors report in the interviews.

While one of the research questions alludes to the effectiveness of the tutors’ online discussion forum facilitation techniques the research does not purport to quantify this. Rather it is attempting to capture tutors’ reflections on how well their techniques work.
1.9. Thesis structure

Chapter one introduces the research topic and places it in context. The chapter also outlines the author’s motivation for conducting the research and a target group is identified for the report. The research questions are explained and a brief overview of the research method is given.

A review of current literature is done in chapter two. This review looks at pedagogical principles and the principles that are relevant to discussion forums. There is discussion around the technology behind discussion forums, forum management, the differing roles they are used for, and what skills are required by a tutor. The role of the student is also considered, what potential barriers may limit online study and participation, what perceptions the student may have about learning and how these could impact learning outcomes. Lastly there is analysis of the appropriateness of the subject material and how well it lends itself to online delivery.

Chapter three contains brief descriptions of research methodologies and the research methodology that this report uses is identified. The rationale behind this methodology is explained and the reasons for choosing it are given. The chapter also has a more detailed description of how the research data were gathered, collated and analysed.

Results of the data collection are detailed in chapter four. After presenting a summary of the interview responses, themes present in each of the interviews are also identified and grouped into relevant categories.

The results are analysed more closely in chapter five. The themes are grouped into relevant categories and comparisons are made between the themes mentioned by differing demographic groups. The strategies that the tutors used to increase participation and learning are analysed and contrasted with the barriers the tutors reported. These results are then cross-referenced back to the findings and discussion in the literature review.

The implications of the results from chapter four and analysis from chapter five are discussed in chapter six. The results are compared and contrasted with what was found in the literature in chapter two and conclusions drawn.
1.10. Summary

An overview of the research topic has been presented, and the importance and relevancy of the study discussed in the context of modern online learning. The author’s personal motivation has been given and the target audience of the research output established. The research questions have been put forward along with a brief summary of the research method. Limitations of the research have been identified and the structure of this document outlined.
2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This chapter presents a review of current literature concerning online learning and discussion forums. Pedagogical principles relevant to the teaching and learning processes involved in discussion forums are found in the literature and analysed. Issues surrounding discussion forums such as technology, management, the role of the forum and the skills required by the tutor are discussed. The involvement of the student and the barriers that they may face in using discussion forums are considered. The effect of subject matter and its appropriateness to online delivery are examined.

2.2. Pedagogical Principles

Much of the rationale driving, and the justification for, online discussion forums, stems from current theories of learning. In particular, Thomas (2003, p. 343) maintains that Malcolm Knowles’ work on andragogy or “adult learning” theory can be applied to online discussion forums and that one of the primary principles of andragogy is the considerable autonomy that adult learners enjoy. Adults are able to self-direct their learning and that this leads away from the face-to-face “chalk and talk model”. This argument could be extended to argue that the asynchronous nature of discussion forums allows adults to formulate and contribute to a discourse in their own time and at their own pace. Laurillard (1993, p. 168) states that “An obvious pedagogical advantage over the normal face-to-face tutorial is that students can take time to ponder the various points made, and can make their contributions in their own time.”

The implications of interactive dialogue in a learning context were used by Laurillard (1999) to develop a “conversational” model for adult learning which places emphasis on inter and intra-personal dialogue as being necessary to the process of formulating new knowledge.

Essentially, a learning process complex enough to achieve the aims of academic learning must involve at least two participants, operating iteratively and interactively on two levels – practice and discussion – and connecting
those two levels by the activities of adaptation and reflection (Laurillard, 1999, p. 114).

With reference to Laurillard’s (1999) conversational model of adult learning, Thomas (2003, p. 345) states that “According to this theory of adult learning, new knowledge is not merely acquired through passively receiving transmitted information. Rather, adults integrate new information into increasingly complex structures through a dialectic process in which dialogue is crucial.” It would seem that an Internet-based discussion forum could be a candidate medium for allowing this type of learning to take place in that it does allow for interactive and reflective discourse. Indeed, Collis (1998, p. 375) has expressed the view that current tertiary learning and teaching practice should

scaffold the learner’s increased self-responsibility for learning. Stimulate active engagement. Elicit articulation and reflection. Lecture less and give feedback more. Encourage more frequent and targeted communication.

The keywords in this quote that relate directly to online discussion forums are “active engagement”, “articulation”, “reflection”, “feedback” and “communication”. These co-relate well to Thomas’ comment above in which he states that dialogue is crucial in the formation of knowledge, and to Laurillard’s (1999) “conversational model” of learning.

Similarly, the concept of social community being a prerequisite for “generating intellectual camaraderie” is proposed by Haavind (2007, p. 48) who recommends the use of ice-breakers and social discussion forums to facilitate the development of such a community among a course’s participants. Brown and Adler (2008, p. 18) feel that one of the deeper impacts of the Internet, its ability to facilitate social learning, has yet to reach its full potential. The rapid update of social networking sites such as Bebo, MySpace and FaceBook is testament to the attraction of online networking to many people, old and young alike. Brown and Adler arrive at an interesting concept contrasting the well known “I think, therefore I am” statement by Rene Descartes and the pedagogical principles of transfer of knowledge to the student with a social aspect of learning: “We participate, therefore we are” (p. 18).
Learning collaboratively is receiving considerable attention in the literature, especially in the perception of knowledge as a social construct. The knowledge-building concept and its relationship with collaborative learning is illustrated by Cheung, et al. (2007, p. 42), Martens, Bastiaens and Kirschner (2007, p. 82) and Nachmias et al. (2000, p. 94), among others. The combination of constructivist theory and communication technology has created a framework in which computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) is possible (Nachmias et al., 2000, p. 82). Indeed, Nisbet (2004, p. 123) found that “most authors appear to see constructivism as the philosophical base for e-learning”. If we consider pedagogical philosophy as a continuum that extends between instructivist and constructivist approaches (Reeves, 1998, p. 4) we could place e-learning and discussion forum usage at the constructivist end of the scale.

Another Internet tool that is being used to foster social collaborative learning is virtual realities. Second Life is perhaps the most commonly used virtual world for education purposes (although education would account for only a fraction of its use). The Terra Incognita project by the University of Queensland uses Second Life to host a virtual classroom which supports lectures and students working in small groups (Brown & Adler, 2008, p. 20). This approach being quite recent there appears to be little research published that demonstrates the pedagogical effectiveness of the tool.

Discussion forums, as a learning tool, have the capacity to fulfil pedagogical goals, but in reality do they? The ideal forum would see all students participating with rich, meaningful contributions, engaging and challenging fellow students to build their own conceptual framework of the topic being studied. Nachmias et al. (2000, p. 100) found that the problem of engaging an entire class in a discussion required time and creativity to resolve. Oliver and Shaw (2003, p. 56) found that “student engagement remains problematic” and look at the value of assessment as a tool to encourage participation.

The link between participation and learning is worth scrutiny. While it may seem intuitive that participation is a pre-requisite to learning, what is unknown is the optimal level of participation and whether it can be shown that there is a causal relationship. Wade, Bentley and Waters (2006, p. 2), in proposing a set of guidelines for threaded discussion forums, claim that “increased participation in threaded
discussion forums leads to increased learning”. Knowlton (2005) proposes a five step taxonomy describing the levels of participation in asynchronous discussions. These are (a) passive participation, (b) developmental participation, (c) generative participation, (d) dialogical participation, (e) meta-cognitive participation (p. 155). Knowlton has used a constructivist approach in the descriptions of these five steps as he believes it appropriate to differentiate between “prescriptions of how instructors should structure and facilitate an asynchronous discussion” and “descriptions of how learning occurs” (p. 156).

However, while participation is important, how is the quality and quantity of discussion group interaction measured (Nisbet, 2004, p. 122)? There are various studies of student discussion forum interaction in terms of quality and quantity of contribution (Beuchot & Bullen, 2005; Corich, Kinshuk, & Hunt, 2004; Dennen, 2005; Lipponen, Rahikainen, Lallimo, & Hakkarainen, 2001; Murphy, 2004; Nisbet, 2004; Pendergast, 2006). Quantity of contributions can be measured using an analysis of student postings with most LMSs providing this facility. However, quality of contribution is more difficult to assess and is usually dependant on a “human” assessor. Spatariu, Hartley and Bendixen (2004, p. 2) conducted a literature survey which found the following methods for analysing online discussion:

- argument structure analysis
- content analysis
- interaction based coding
- levels of disagreement.

Clearly an accurate measure of the quality of students’ contributions to a discussion forum can involve considerable skills and time on the part of the tutor.

### 2.3. Underlying Technology

The technology used to run asynchronous discussion is web-based and almost always now comes packaged within a learning management system (LMS). There are a number of LMS packages available, and some education institutions have built their own. WebCT and Blackboard have been predominant in the New Zealand market,
however, the open source Moodle (Modular Object Oriented Distributed Learning Environment) package now has a strong following. As of 13 December 2007 Moodle.org lists 153 New Zealand Moodle sites, with 16 being recognized tertiary providers. There are now a number of secondary schools using Moodle (Corich, 2005), presumably because of the low entry cost due to the software being free. Further, some tertiary institutions in New Zealand are either trialling Moodle or running Moodle in tandem with either Blackboard or WebCT. The discussion forum features of WebCT, Blackboard and Moodle are essentially the same, all providing threaded forums, posts, replies and attachments. Exactly how the minor differences between the LMS packages impact tutors and their online teaching strategies would be worth investigating, but is not the subject of this research.

Being web-based, the technology is essentially client/server architecture, with both students and tutors requiring Internet access, either directly via dial-up or broadband, or indirectly through their organisation’s or institution’s Internet connection. The client software is a web browser, while the server software is typically a mainstream web server.

2.4. The Tutor

Responsibility for the discussion forum is solely the tutor’s. The course may have been designed by another party (such as an instructional designer) but it is the tutor’s role to initiate the discussions, ask the questions, affirm or redirect student responses, provide pastoral support, and at the end of the discussion to conclude it.

Young and McSporran (2004) outline the additional skills required by tutors to teach online. Among the skills they list are “Online Pedagogical Skills”, under which they have itemised:

**Online community building:** Academics have to learn how to welcome, encourage, support and control students in an online environment.

**Discussion Forum:** There is a wide range of skills to learn to facilitate an effective online discussion. These include discussion activity design and set-up, discussion introduction and close-down, discussion moderation, and assessment of contributions.
At first glance these appear not too dissimilar to the skills required of tutors in a traditional class setting. However, in class, both students and tutors can make use of non-verbal communication to add and derive meaning. This is not available in the online context and in fact tutors “must account for the fact that they are not in the presence of live students, able to gauge reactions, and make small adjustments on the spot on an as needed basis” (Dennen, 2005, p. 128). Likewise there is a vast difference between real-time dialogue and asynchronous discussion. According to Collison, Elbaum, Haavind and Tinker (2000, p. 35), “in the shifting environment of real-time dialogue, appropriate comments can be confirmed and incorrect information may either be passed over or corrected or skirted in favor of comments that move the discussion forward.” In contrast, online “postings are frozen in asynchronous time to appear forever in the text-based discussion areas”.

The concept of a facilitator acting in the role of “guide on the side” as opposed to “sage on the stage”, as proposed by King (1993), appears frequently in modern day learning models. One of the problems with using this approach in online asynchronous communication is that even in moderately small courses a tutor cannot be the centre or hub of communication channels. According to Collison et al. (2000, p. 34) tutors “report being overwhelmed with enrolments as small as ten or twelve, because they end up in email conversations with each participant.” Clearly the guide has to be truly “on the side” of an entire class as opposed to individual students. Of the two main types of asynchronous communication, discussion forums provide a better structure for this than does email.

Using Reeves’ (1998, p. 7) pedagogical dimension defining the role of the tutor as being a continuum extending from a didactic role to a facilitative role, the discussion forums seem best suited to the tutor acting more in the facilitative role. If a tutor were to adopt a didactic teaching style in a discussion forum they could completely negate the point of it being a “discussion” forum.

The issue of tutor “presence” is discussed in the literature in terms of what is too little, too much or just right. The appropriate level of instructor presence is best described as moderate, and issues can arise if the instructor is either ever-present or absent (Dennen, 2005, p. 145). Anderson, Rourke, Garrison and Archer (2001, p. 3) classify teaching presence at three levels, “design and administration, facilitating discourse
and direct instruction”. Of particular interest is the facilitating discourse classification. Anderson et al. use the term discourse as opposed to discussion to differentiate the higher levels of cognition implied by the term discourse. A framework for evaluating discourse facilitation is proposed by Anderson et al. (p. 8) as follows:

- identifying areas of agreement/disagreement
- seeking to reach consensus/understanding
- encouraging, acknowledging, or reinforcing student contributions
- setting climate for learning
- drawing in participants, prompting discussion
- assessing the efficacy of the process.

Smith and Winking-Diaz (2004, p. 2) reported on two tutor behaviours they claim to be crucial in achieving student engagement in an online course. These were:

- the ability to manage discussions by providing appropriate structure and pacing, and giving students sufficient time for thinking and creativity;
- an amalgam of instructional activities that include giving students technical assistance in a timely manner, posting summaries of discussions, and offering students affective support.

The concept of student engagement used by Smith and Winking-Diaz includes not only student interactivity with each other and the tutor but also interactivity with the course content.

Wade, Bentley and Waters (2006) have developed “Twenty Guidelines for Successful Threaded Discussions” which include tips for discussion setup, participation, questions, moderating and evaluation of participation. Some of the recommendations they make are:
Discussion Setup

- Having a manageable discussion group size of about 10-15 people.
- Having a time limit of about one week.
- Having guidelines as to what qualifies as a substantive post.

Participation

- Deciding whether it is required.
- Asking students to post 2-4 discussions per week.
- Having guidelines as to what constitutes etiquette while online.
- Having a mutually understand process for handling unacceptable messages.

Discussion Questions

- Using meaningful questions to stimulate discussion.
- Encouraging students to generate their own questions.
- Using questions that facilitate exploration and review.
- Using questions that require students to bring in their life experiences.

Moderating discussions

- Using moderator input to encourage critical thinking.
- Using feedback to students to promote learning.
- Encouraging students to act as moderators.

Evaluation of Participation

- Using a defined method for evaluating student participation.
- Ensuring that individuals in each team are assessed fairly.
- Using periodic evaluations to give feedback to students on how they are progressing.

2.5. The Student

Student behaviour, commitment and participation will have a bearing on both the format and effectiveness of a discussion forum in much the same way as they do in a classroom situation. However, a typical student does face additional barriers when using a discussion forum. Apart from the obvious limitations of Internet access speed
and reliability, study time and possibly literacy shortcomings, there are other barriers of which an online tutor must be cognizant. Lynch (2004, p. 42) writes that the “seeming immediacy of the online environment can be deceiving and lead to bad habits.” Often students get caught in the trap of expecting replies to their postings (or emails) within minutes and assume the worst when this does not happen. Such expectations can lead to disillusion with an online course from the outset.

The lack of social cues and feedback such as tone of voice, facial expression and body language may result in “social coordination problems” in an online discussion forum (Chen & Caropreso, 2004, p. 3). The absence of these social cues can also be of benefit as some of the negative social cues (such as those from dominant communicators) are also missing, allowing more contribution from minority groups (Baron, 1984, as cited by Chen & Caropreso, 2004, p. 3)

Lynch (2004, p. 43) states that “it is not uncommon for the new online student to feel vulnerable or inadequate when communicating online.” Some students are not skilled at using keyboard or word processing software and can be very conscious of potential mistakes. In the traditional classroom setting normally only the tutor will see each student’s work, but in a discussion forum the students’ work and thinking are up for scrutiny by the entire class. This can be off-putting for beginners and it is the tutor’s task to create an online environment in which the students will be comfortable.

Among the additional skills and knowledge that an online student must have is computer literacy. Garrison, Cleveland-Innes and Fung (2004, p. 64) list the role adjustments than an online learner must make:

- knowledge about, skill with, and acceptance of, the technology
- new modes and amounts of communication with instructors, peers and administrators
- increased levels of learner self-direction, and
- a new “place” for learning in time (anytime, usually determined by the learner and their life circumstances) and space (anywhere, dependent upon equipment requirements).
The attitudes with which students approach discussion forums are likely to be a combination of their past experiences (if any) with forums, and expectations of what the forums will do for them. Students may be bringing to the forums their prior experiences and this in turn could impact the degree of motivation they with which they approach a forum.

In other words, satisfaction is based on memories of the past use of a system. Motivation, conversely, is based on beliefs about the future use of the system. Since beliefs about the future are based to an extent on memories of the past, satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with past system usage will influence motivation to use the system in the future. (Mullany, Tan & Gallupe, 2007, p. 464)

Motivation issues for the student can be considered extrinsic or intrinsic (Reeves, 1998, p. 9). With respect to discussion forums and online dialogue the intrinsic motivations are likely to include “the suspense provoked by waiting for responses, the surprise of unexpected interventions, and the sense of accomplishment that comes from the recognition of others and the successful grasp of new ideas” (Xin & Feenburg, 2006, p. 16). According to Xin and Feenburg each message sent in an educational dialog has two aims: communicating content and eliciting further response. This is somewhat akin to the sparring that can take place in an intellectual debate. The main extrinsic motivation is likely to be a participatory requirement (set by the tutor) for marks. Other than the desire to conform to what the rest of the class is doing, it is difficult to actually force a student to participate in a forum.

The students’ personalities may impact their work in an online discussion forum in several ways and to different extents.

Students that tend to be more socially outgoing and engaging, inclined to agreeableness and intellectual and/or imaginative experiences talk with others using two-way communication, therefore, seem better able to meet the goals of collaborative online interaction.

Students that tend to be more socially retiring and reserved and less inclined to be interested in sustained social interaction are more likely to use one-way communication for online discussion. (Chen & Caropreso, 2004, p. 13)
While there are issues with the concept of “one-way communication” in communication theory the point that Chen and Caropreso make is nevertheless valid. From their research it would appear that the student’s ability to engage in interactive dialogue is partly defined by his/her personality.

Shyness is a personality trait that has an impact on a student’s preparedness to participate in a face-to-face discussion. Yang and Tang (2003, p. 103) argue that discussion forums may offer an environment that mitigates the effect of shyness. Ebner and Holzinger (2002, p. 7) found that “Questions which would not be asked in the lecture room because of shyness or fear of inappropriateness were posed without such inhibition in the eLearning environment.” Whether such inhibitions are completely removed when using a discussion forum is debatable – further research in this area would be useful.

The nature of online discussion forums dictates team-work and collaboration. Working in teams can be an issue for some students for a variety of reasons. Some students prefer learning and studying on their own, others are concerned with the potential free riders in a group and some find the management and logistics of maintaining communication channels in a group onerous (Rassuli & Manzer, 2005, p. 24). In a study done by Rassuli and Manzer comparing the learning outcomes and ability to problem solve, the groups that had prior positive experiences in team learning achieved significantly better (p. 25). An interesting conclusion drawn by Tolhurst (2004) was that not only do students’ existing epistemological beliefs have a direct impact on their learning, but that small group work could in turn influence epistemological beliefs. Tolhurst then asks the question “What is the best structure to encourage the most desirable outcomes regarding students’ beliefs, and hence desirable approaches and outcomes?” (p. 315).

The barriers that a student may face when using online discussion forums are (note that these include perceived barriers):

- computer literacy (Garrison et al., 2004, p. 64)
- distracted discussions (Dooley & Wickersham, 2007, p. 4)
- dominated discussions (Dooley & Wickersham, 2007, p. 5)

• gender differences and the balance of genders in a forum (Rovai & Baker, 2005, p. 33)

• high volume of reading and replies, large group size (Brush, Barger, Grudin, Borning, & Gupta, 2002, p. 7; Dooley & Wickersham, 2007, p.1; Lipponen et al., 2001, p. 7; Wang, 2007, p. 20)

• instructor beliefs and expectations, in the way in which they influence the students perceived value of the discussion forum tool (Dennen, 2005, p. 140; Levin & Wadmany, 2006, p. 1; Oliver & Shaw, 2003, p. 62; Young & McSporran, 2004)

• instructor presence/support (Dennen, 2005, p. 142; Hammond, 2005; Markel, 2001, p. 9; Mao, 2003, p. 214)

• lack of assessment of collaborative learning tasks (Wang, 2007, p. 19)

• lack of confidence, including not wanting to appear ignorant online (Hart, 2005, p.53; Khoo et al., 2005, p. 347)

• motivational (Lipponen et al., 2001, p. 7; Martens et al., 2007, p. 90; Pena-Schaff et al., p. 411, Pendergast, 2006, p. 11)

• poor written communication skills (Corich et al., 2004, p. 8; Lipponen et al., 2001, p. 7; Oliver & Shaw, 2003, p. 62; Prinsen, Volman & Terwal, 2006, p. 1037; Wang, 2007, p. 19)

• poorly designed courses and activities (Dennen, 2005, p. 128; Hammond, 2005; Oliver & Shaw, 2003, p. 62)

• public evaluations of individual learners (Haavind, 2005, p. 5)

• relevance to other course activities (Dennen, 2005, p. 140; Hart, 2005, p.53)

• relevance to students’ lives (Dennen, 2005, p. 141; Hart, 2005, p. 53)
• shyness (Yang & Tang, 2003, p. 103)

• student inexperience with cooperative learning (Pena-Schaff et al., p. 411; Rassuli & Manzer, 2005, p. 26; Wang, 2007, p. 19)


• technology (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 3; Hammond, 2005; Hart, 2005, p. 53)

• unwillingness by students to share informational resources (Oliver & Shaw, 2003, p. 62)

Students do have positive attitudes to online discussion forums and a study done by Wu and Hiltz (2004, p. 147) revealed that students believed the forums were of benefit to their learning. The study also showed what the students liked best in using discussion forums:

• anonymity feature

• being connected between students and instructors

• clearly and openly express opinions without fear

• convenience

• ease of use

• flexibility of time and space

• interaction

• less pressure

• no transportation needed

• provides more social interaction

• the dynamic nature of content and the sharing of experiences among peers.
From the students’ perspective it would seem that the minimisation of barriers and maximisation of the benefits outlined above will enhance learning outcomes.

2.6. **The Role of the Discussion Forum**

Discussion forums are multi-purpose. In some online courses they are administrative, being used to notify students of upcoming events and as a forum for students to ask general questions about the course, unrelated to the course content. They can also be used for questions and answers related to course content, to enable collaborative group work and as an assessment tool. More importantly, they can be used to asynchronously manage text based discussions, discourse and dialogue for students and tutors who cannot meet face-to-face (Laurillard, 1993, p. 168).

The discussion forum software is usually set up to display postings in either strict chronological order or as threaded postings with each reply to a post showing as an offshoot to an earlier post. In some LMS packages the ability to add an entirely new starter thread can be limited to the tutor. Exactly which format is used is often the choice of the tutor or the course designer, however, threaded discussions are useful for reflective discourse (Weasonforth, Biesenbach-Lucas & Meloni, 2002, p. 59).

2.7. **Subject Matter**

Baim (2004, p. 2) discusses the reasons why students, tutors and employers expect an online course to equate to the same course offered in a conventional setting. It seems rare that an online course is developed completely from scratch and bearing no resemblance to an existing traditional course. Baim maintains that, initially, it makes more sense to transpose or modify existing courses into an online format. This raises the question, “what type of course subject matter and what levels are best suited to online delivery?” While this question appears to go unanswered in the literature (Arbaugh, 2005, p. 58), there are occasional references to the relevancy of subject matter in online courses. For example, the American National Education Association’s Higher Education policy statement reads as follows:

> Distance education should only be used for a type of instruction that is suited to online delivery. Several factors should be considered in this regard. One factor is
the subject matter of the course. Another factor is the developmental level of the students (National Education Association, 2006, B 3).

In an empirical analysis of the importance of subject matter to learning outcomes for online courses, Arbaugh (2005, p. 66) found that subject matter accounted for only 14% of the differences in learning outcomes. The conclusion Arbaugh drew from this result was that “technological, behavioural, institutional and other factors also influence online course effectiveness”. In the same study Arbaugh also found that the way a course was run could be used to predict the course outcomes. “The two most consistently significant course conduct variables were instructor experience with online courses and student use of the course site” (p. 66).

The relationship between what might be a suitable subject or discipline for online learning and what might be best for online discussion forums is not well defined. The discussion forums are only a subset of the teaching tools within an online course and it does not necessarily follow that what might a good subject for an online course is also a good subject for discussion forums. According to the literature reviewed to date, discussion forums enhance interaction, feedback, collaboration learning and reflection. It could be assumed that any discipline that might benefit from these outcomes would be a candidate for discussion forums as part of an online course.

Within disciplines there is also the question of academic level and cognitive domain. Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill and Krathwohl (1956) developed a taxonomy for the cognitive domain. The taxonomy ranged from simple to complex with six levels: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Generally, the higher academic levels (in New Zealand the levels range from 1 through 9) require students to work at the higher end of the scale. While knowledge and comprehension might be demonstrated using discussion forums it is likely that forums are more suited to higher learning. It is also likely they are more suited to established learners, those able to manage their own learning (National Education Association, 2006, B 3).

2.8. **Summary**

The literature review found a number of authors who discussed the pedagogical implications of online discussion forums and the barriers students may face when
using the forums in their learning. Foremost in the literature was the view that
discussion forums fit into the constructivist model of learning, and that online
dialogue, discourse and engagement were crucial components of knowledge
construction. The link between participation and learning was examined, and
literature that researched that link was found and discussed.

The technology behind online discussion forums was described and the major
learning management systems that provided discussion forum features were
identified.

The role of the tutor and the skills they need to teach online were researched. The
review found that tutors require additional skills when teaching online. These skills
encompassed technical, communication and interpersonal skills. Technical skills to
use the technology and assist students to use the technology, communication skills to
use an asynchronous text based medium without the usual non-verbal cues that go
with face-to-face communication, and interpersonal skills to interact effectively with a
remote student.

The literature review found that there were a number of student issues that could
affect learning with discussion forums. Motivational issues, extrinsic and intrinsic,
affected levels of participation. Technology barriers and problems with software and
computer literacy were also factors. There was evidence in the literature that
suggested students’ personalities impacted their ability to learn, and that prior
experiences in online learning were enabling (and disabling) factors in the attitudes
with which students approached online forums.

The role of the discussion forum was examined, along with the effect of subject
matter on online learning and within discussion forums. It was found that subject
matter had little bearing on the outcomes of student learning online and that other
factors have a greater impact on online course outcomes.
3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

It is generally accepted that research methodologies fall into two main categories, quantitative and qualitative research, each of which can broken down further into sub-categories. Common to both of these approaches is the literature review. According to Webster and Watson (2002, p. 13) “an effective review creates a firm foundation for advancing knowledge.” This chapter describes the various approaches to research, the advantages and disadvantages of the approaches and finally explains the reasoning and justification of the methodology chosen for this study.

3.2. Quantitative Research

Quantitative research is regarded as the earliest or “traditional” research methodology and is also known as “Logical positivism”. It uses “experimental methods and quantitative measures to test hypothetical generalisations” (Hoepfl, 1997, p. 48). Quantitative methods began in the natural sciences and were used to research natural phenomena (Myers, 1997, p. 241). Myers lists tools likely to be used in this type of research as “survey methods, laboratory experiments, formal methods (e.g. econometrics) and numerical methods such as mathematical modelling.”

Survey methods typically consist of “collecting information by asking a set of pre-formulated questions in a predetermined sequence in a structured questionnaire to a sample of individuals drawn so as to be representative of a defined population” (Hutton, 1990, p. 8). Alternatively they can also involve observation and record keeping by the researcher, or by a structured interview (Leedy, 1997, p. 199).

Experimental methods or experimental study assumes a large degree of control over the research situation, with a small number of variables that are interpreted as being significant (or not) in a possible causal relationship (Leedy, 1997, p. 229). One of the difficulties with experimental research is limiting the number of variables and reducing the possibility of alternative explanations for a given result (Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 2003, p. 76).
3.3. Qualitative Research

Qualitative research methods arose in the social sciences and were originally designed to allow researchers to study social phenomena (Myers, 1997). Ertmer (1997, p. 155) sees qualitative research as a “broad term that encompasses a variety of approaches to interpretive research”. The keyword here being “interpretive” in that unlike quantitative research that sets out to prove or disprove an hypothesis, qualitative research strives to “make sense” of a given situation. According to the Qualitative Research Consultants Association (2005):

Qualitative research is designed to reveal a target audience’s range of behavior and the perceptions that drive it with reference to specific topics or issues. It uses in-depth studies of small groups of people to guide and support the construction of hypotheses. The results of qualitative research are descriptive rather than predictive.

Various authors sub-categorise qualitative research slightly differently. Myers (1997) describes action research, case study, ethnography and grounded theory. Ertmer (1997) describes case study, ethnography, phenomenology and grounded theory.

Myers (2007) quotes Rapoport’s definition of action research as being the definition most commonly used:

Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework (Rapoport, 1970, p. 499).

Blaxter et al. (2003, p. 69) describe criteria that distinguish action research.

Action research:

- aims at improvement and involvement
- deals with individuals as members of social groups
- involves a change intervention
• involves a cyclic process in which research, action and evaluation are interlinked

• is educative

• is founded on a research relationship in which those involved are participants in the change process

• is problem focused, context specific and future oriented.

Case studies focus narrowly on a limited number of examples or cases (Blaxter et al., 2003, p. 71). Yin (2002, p. 13) describes a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”. This exploration of a phenomenon and collection of information and data is over a sustained period of time (Cresswell, 1998, p. 12).

Ethnography research is the study of human cultures via first hand observation (Genzuk, 2003). Ethnographers spend much of their time in the field, and immerse themselves in the cultural context of what they are researching (Myers, 2007).

The grounded theory approach to research originated with the work of two sociologists, Glaser and Straus in 1967. According to Leedy (1997, p. 163) they wanted to address “the embarrassing gap between theory and empirical research”;

   The theory is “grounded” in that it is developed from the data, as opposed to being suggested by the literature; that is, theory is an expected output from, rather than a starting point for the study.

3.4. Chosen Research Method

Qualitative research methods are appropriate when the researcher is “first identifying the variables that might later be tested quantitatively” (Hoepfl, 1997, p. 49). For this reason the research method chosen for this research is the qualitative view, using an in-depth study of a small group of tutors to gather their perceptions, insights and strategies when using asynchronous discussion forums to facilitate learning.
The case study approach is appropriate for examining in depth the approach a small group of tutors take to encouraging participation in discussion forums. The case in question is multiple tutors’ use of discussion forums. The advantages of case studies are that:

1. the data comes from individuals’ practice and experience and match reality

2. generalisations can be made from a specific to general issues

3. the complexity of real life situations can be used to explore alternative meanings and interpretations

(adapted from Blaxter et al., 2003, p. 73).

3.5. Data Gathering

For logistical reasons (geographically-distanced tutors) the data was usually gathered using semi-structured telephone interviews, although in several instances the interview was in person. Twelve New Zealand tertiary tutors were interviewed by the author for between 20 and 30 minutes each. The selection of interviewees was based on the “Expert Sampling” purposive method as described by Trochim (2005). The relatively small number of tertiary tutors actively using discussion forums in New Zealand precluded gathering survey type data from a large population. The interviewees were tutors either known to the author or available through contacts available to the author.

Sample interview questions are included in Appendix A and are a combination of questions to determine background demographic data along with more open-ended questions to explore the interviewees’ attitudes and practices within discussion forums.

Given the method used for the selection of a sample it was anticipated that the tutors would be willing to provide objective and in-depth data during each interview. This proved to be true in practice with many of the tutors expressing an interest in the possible outcomes of the research.
All the interviews were recorded on micro-cassette and were later transferred to MP3 format so that they could be stored digitally. The digital copies of the interviews were then quite easy to transcribe using software to “jog” back and forth or to pause while typing the interviews into a word processor. Comments and answers given by the respondents were enclosed in braces in the text to differentiate them from the author’s own comments and questions. Each of the interview transcripts were then saved as a text file and imported into the N6 (NUD*IST 6) qualitative research software developed by QSR International, Australia.

3.6. Data Analysis

Within N6, each of the demographic questions (1 – 14) was allocated nodes indicating the range of responses applicable to the question. Questions 15 – 17 were treated slightly differently with separate nodes being created for barriers and the techniques used by the respondents.

The interview transcripts were then analysed identifying themes relevant to the research. Quite often a tutor would answer a demographic question with a simple “yes” or “no” and then expand on the answer, giving their rationale. This provided some interesting comments and insights about the tutors’ use of discussion forums.

3.7. Summary

A brief overview of the common research methods has been given and some of the advantages and disadvantages of each discussed. The chosen research method for this study was identified, and a justification for this choice made. The data gathering processes and the techniques used in the analysis of the data were described.
4. Results

4.1. Introduction

This chapter summarises the results of the interviews and groups the results under five headings: the demographic data obtained from the first fourteen questions and data available to the interviewer (summarised in Table 1), the barriers to participation (summarised in Table 2), the barriers to learning (summarised in Table 3), the strategies employed by tutors to overcome these barriers (summarised in Table 4) and the results of a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts (summarised in Table 5).

4.2. Demographic Results

The following data are derived from questions 1 to 14 of the interviews. Gender and subject area data were not taken from the interview transcripts but were ascertained by the author. The data are summarised in Table 1 at the end of this section.

Gender

Eight of the interviewees were female, four male.

Subject Area

Academic subject areas represented by the tutors interviewed were (numbers of tutors are shown in brackets):

- applied writing (2)
- business management (2)
- information systems (1)
- nursing (2)
- religious studies (1)
- social work (4).
**Teaching experience with online tools in general**

Years of experience range from one year through to ten years, with seven tutors having more than four years, two having between two and four years, and three having less than two years.

**Teaching experience with discussion forum software**

There was slightly less teaching experience with discussion forums than for online tools in general. Years of experience range from one year through to seven years, with six tutors having more than four years, one having between two and four years, and five having less that two years.

**Level of importance placed on the impact of discussion forums in the way the tutor teaches**

Nine tutors rated their usage of discussion forums as important. Three tutors rated discussion forums as “important but equal with other methods”.

**Level of importance placed on the impact of discussion forums in the way the student learns**

More tutors felt that discussion forums were important in the way students learn. Eleven tutors rated them important, with one rating them equal to other modes of learning.

**Online component of tutors’ teaching**

Eight tutors did all of their teaching online, the remainder taught online about two thirds of the time, with two tutors doing a blended approach with some classes.

**Academic levels of courses taught online**

Six tutors were engaged in teaching at the undergraduate diploma level, five at the undergraduate degree level and five at postgraduate level. One tutor taught across all three levels, one at both undergraduate levels and one at undergraduate diploma and postgraduate levels.
Students with English as a second language (ESL)

Five tutors taught online courses with no ESL students, six tutors with a small number and one tutor with a moderate number. Of the seven tutors that did have some students for whom English was a second language, none reported this as having an impact on the online course.

The prime role of the discussion forum in the course

Some tutors identified more than one role; the numbers of tutors identifying each role is included in brackets in the listing below:

- assessment (1)
- community building (4)
- critiquing (2)
- facilitate interaction (6)
- feedback mechanism (3)
- major form of teaching (2)
- problem solving (2)
- reinforce reading (2)

Use of face-to-face sessions teaching students how to use the learning management system and how to use a discussion forum

Five tutors responded with a “yes”, the other seven with a “no”.

Use of introductions and icebreakers at beginning of an online course

Ten tutors responded with a “yes”, the other two with a “no”. All except one of the tutors that responded with a “yes” to the previous question also responded in the positive for this question. Four of the tutors that responded in the positive also reported the introduction and icebreakers as being moderately successful.
Use of moderation

No tutors applied any “pre” moderation to their discussion forums. However, three tutors did indicate they were aware of what was being posted and would remove anything not in keeping with the forum. The general consensus was that moderation was unnecessary at the levels taught.

Encouragement of reflective practices

Eleven tutors felt they actively encouraged students to use reflective practice in the discussion forums. Only one did not.

Assessment of participation

Six tutors did allocate a component of the course grade to the students’ participation in discussion forums. Six did not.

Assessment of contribution

Five tutors did allocate a component of the course grade to the quality of the students’ contributions to discussion forums. All five also responded positively for assessment of participation. None of them seemed concerned with the authenticity of students’ contributions. Seven tutors did not assess contribution, one of them assessed participation.

Table 1: Interview Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tutor</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>J</th>
<th>K</th>
<th>L</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject Area</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied Writing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Systems</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Studies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience with online tools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater than 4 years</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience with discussion forums</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater than 4 years</td>
<td>6 1 1 1 1 1 1 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 2 years</td>
<td>5 1 1 1 1 1 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Importance</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal with others</td>
<td>3 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>9 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Importance</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal with others</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>11 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online Teaching Component</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complete</td>
<td>8 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial</td>
<td>4 1 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>6 1 1 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>5 1 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>5 1 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ESL Students</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>5 1 1 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small number</td>
<td>6 1 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate number</td>
<td>1 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prime Role</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community building</td>
<td>4 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critiquing</td>
<td>2 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate interactions</td>
<td>6 1 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback mechanism</td>
<td>3 1 1 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major form of teaching</td>
<td>2 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>2 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforce reading</td>
<td>2 1 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Face-to-face introductory sessions</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2-4 years</td>
<td>2 1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 2 years</td>
<td>3 1 1 1 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Introductions and Icebreakers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Moderation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>0</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reflective Practices**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Assess Participation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Assess Contribution**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.3. Perceived barriers to participation

The following barriers to student participation came from the tutors’ responses to question 15 of the interview. The barriers are listed in order of the number of tutors who identified each, and are summarised in Table 2 at the end of this section.

**Technology** – Six tutors believed technology to be a barrier. These tutors cited connection issues (dial up as opposed to broadband) and issues with the discussion forum software itself.

**Lack of confidence** – Four tutors believed lack of confidence could cause low levels of student participation in forums.

**Life pressures** – Four tutors thought that extra-curricula activity had a direct impact on a student’s ability to participate fully in forums. These activities consisted of employment, family, social and other study.
**Computer literacy** – Two tutors believed some students struggled with computer literacy.

**Lack of tutor interest** – One tutor thought a low level of interest displayed by the tutor could cause poor participation.

**Alternative communication media available** – One tutor found that students would not use the forums if they had alternative media available (the forums were used largely for interaction and collaboration)

**Cultural** – One tutor believed a “Kiwi” culture of not wanting to appear as a “tall poppy” acted as an impediment to participation.

**Low participation by peers** – One tutor linked low forum activity to low participation levels, in effect a downward spiral.

**Motivation** – One tutor raised the issue of motivation indirectly by indicating low participation by other students could cause a drop in motivation which in turn lowers participation.

**No assessment** – One tutor was of the opinion that students would not participate in the forums unless they were directly assessed on participation.

**Over-confidence** – One tutor felt that students who were over-confident regarding their own knowledge did not participate well.

**Poor discussion topic** – One tutor found that the discussion topic itself, if poorly thought through or not relevant to the course material, could cause low levels of participation.

**Poor written communication skills** – One tutor thought that low written communication skill levels detracted from participation.
Table 2: Barriers to Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrier to Participation</th>
<th>Tutor</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>J</th>
<th>K</th>
<th>L</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of confidence</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life pressures</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer literacy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of tutor interest</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative communication media available</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low participation by peers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No assessment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-confidence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor discussion topic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor written communications skills</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.4. **Perceived barriers to learning**

The following barriers to student learning came from the tutors’ responses to question 15 of the interview. The barriers are listed in order of the number of tutors who identified each, and are summarised in Table 3 at the end of this section.

**Lack of confidence** – Two tutors identified student lack of confidence as an issue.

**Low participation by self** – Two tutors thought that non-participation impeded learning, one of these suggesting a causal relationship between participation and learning.

**Prior experience** – Two tutors identified the level of prior experience as being important in forums and felt the student needed to “have broad enough experience to understand what people are saying.”

**Shyness** – Two tutors thought that student shyness was a barrier to learning.

**Cultural** – One tutor believed that students from a cultural background that relied on verbal histories and learning could be disadvantaged in trying to learn in a written environment such as discussion forums.
Forum traffic – One tutor identified high posting volumes in forums as a barrier to student learning, in the context of the student feeling overwhelmed.

Impersonal nature of the medium – One tutor felt that students’ perceptions of the online medium being dry and impersonal could impede their learning. Having said this, the tutor also thought these perceptions were usually dispelled after several weeks in the course.

Lack of reflection – One tutor thought that the students’ lack of reflective practice was an important barrier to learning.

Low participation by peers – One tutor felt that the forums needed a “critical mass” with enough postings to encourage participation and not to leave students feeling exposed and on their own.

Textual nature of forums – One tutor felt that the text-only nature of forums did not particularly aid learning and that forums that could accommodate a diagramming tool would be useful.

Vulnerability – One tutor identified vulnerability as a barrier to learning.

Table 3: Barriers to Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tutor</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>J</th>
<th>K</th>
<th>L</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barrier to learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of confidence</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low participation by self</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior experience</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shyness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forum traffic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impersonal nature of medium</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of reflection</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low participation by peers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textual nature of forums</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerability</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.5. Strategies used in discussion forums

The following strategies are the techniques that tutors responded with in answer to question 17 of the interview. The strategies are listed in order of the number of tutors who identified each, and are summarised in Table 4 at the end of this section.

Encouragement – Seven tutors identified encouragement as a technique they use.

Questioning – Seven tutors use questioning as a technique.

Feedback – Four tutors use feedback to the students.

Modelling forum behaviour – Three tutors deliberately try to model forum behaviour and usage in order to set an appropriate example for the students.

Forum closure – One tutor identified the need to bring a discussion to a logical conclusion.

Safe learning environment – One tutor tries to make and maintain the forums as a safe learning environment for students.

Positive reinforcement – One tutor positively reinforces examples of students’ postings that satisfy the tutor’s expectations for that forum.

Making the forum a resource – One tutor uses discussion forums as a resource to accustom students to the idea that the forums are a source of vital information for the course.

Scaffolding – One tutor uses scaffolding, providing a supporting structure or framework within discussion forums to guide the student through the learning process, ultimately providing less scaffolding as the learners take more responsibility for their own learning.

Setting up debates – One tutor set up class debates within a discussion forum, nominating class members to present either the pros or the cons of a point of view.
Table 4: Strategies Used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Tutor No.</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>J</th>
<th>K</th>
<th>L</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modelling forum behaviour</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forum closure</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe learning environment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive reinforcement</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making the forum a resource</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scaffolding</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting up debates</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.6. Themes

The following themes were identified in the interviews; some of these relate specifically to the questions on barriers and strategies, however, others came up in more general discussion in response to other questions. A summary of the themes from each of the respondents is shown in Table 5.

1. Reflective practice – eight tutors actively encouraged/required the student to reflect on what they are learning, and in some cases to reflect on professional practice in their workplace. While eleven tutors answered in the positive to the question on whether they encouraged reflective practice, after examining the interviews it appeared that three tutors were not completely focused on the concept and were getting limited response from their students.

2. Interactivity between students – seven tutors emphasised inter-student activity as being important. Contrasting this with the theme of feedback between students it would appear that it was the interactivity (even of a superficial or social nature) that was desired more than particular feedback content.

3. Questioning – seven tutors used questioning techniques in discussion forums for a variety of reasons. A tutor may post questions to the forum to encourage participation, to ask the student to reflect further on what they have written, to generate a level of controversy that in turn increases participation and reflection, and to challenge the student to extend their knowledge.
4. Technology – seven tutors felt that Internet connectivity, bandwidth and browser issues were barriers. There was some dissatisfaction expressed with particular versions of the learning management systems used to deliver the discussion forums.

5. Alternative media – five of the tutors used alternative media such as CDs, textbooks and telephone conference calls in addition to the tools offered by their learning management system. Some of these were specifically to introduce the student to the course, the tutors, and to the learning management system.

6. Encouragement – five tutors often encouraged their students to maintain or increase their level of forum activity. One tutor reported a large percentage of her time taken up on motivating students. Another tutor used private email to encourage or thank a student privately for his/her contribution to the forum.

7. Student interaction with the tutor – this was mentioned by five tutors as being relevant to the way they used discussion forums.

8. Discourse – four tutors identified a difficulty in fostering a true discussion forum with ideas and concepts being put forward and discussed at length. A common criticism was that the forums tended to be used for questions and answers at a superficial level, or as a means to make a statement which was not intended to be discussed.

9. Feedback, student to student – four tutors felt that it was important for students to receive feedback from each other, in addition to what the tutor was providing. Not only was it valued as additional to the tutors but also valued as in contrast to the tutors.

10. Feedback, tutor to student – four tutors felt their level of feedback (in terms of timeliness, content and tone) to the students was critical to the success of the forum.

11. Life pressures – this was expressed by four tutors as a major barrier to the amount of time students could give to discussion forums. These life pressures included employment, family, social and in one case, other study.

12. Online community building – this featured as one of the prime roles of the discussion forum, as a venue to share experiences, ideas and provide support for each other. Four tutors believed there was value to fostering an online community.
13. Authenticity and creativity – when the question was asked of the interviewees whether authenticity of student contributions to discussion forum was an issue, most responded that it was not, and that they would also be able to detect it because of the creative nature of the forums, that is that a student’s “voice” is easily recognisable in a forum albeit a written one. However the issue of authenticity was raised at some point by three tutors, not so much as an issue but rather as an awareness.

14. Incremental raising of the bar – three tutors expected an incremental raising of the standards in the discussion forums over the duration of a course. These tutors consciously accepted a lower standard at the beginning of the course but started to extend the students and expected a higher standard after a few weeks into the course. This also applied to levels of participation where tutors expected more as the course progressed.

15. Lack of confidence – this related mainly to the ability to confidently express an opinion, for the student to have the confidence that what they have to say will be worthwhile to the forum. Three tutors found their students to be self-effacing and to believe that their contribution could have little value. This in turn lowered levels of participation and forum content and prevented other students from reading what could be insightful comments.

16. Main teaching tool – three tutors used the discussion forum feature of their chosen learning management system as their main teaching tool, with most of their teaching and most of the student activity and learning happening in the forums.

17. Modelling forum practice – this was done so that students could see by way of example the format and level of detail required by the tutor. Three tutors felt the students responded positively when the tutor modelled the type of forum behaviour expected by the student.

18. Reinforce reading – three tutors were using forums to gather feedback from students on particular readings that had been set for the class. To provide quality feedback and critique of a reading the student is forced to actually do the reading.

19. Reluctance to commit thoughts to writing – three tutors contrasted students’ behaviour in a verbal setting with a written forum. Their experience was that students
were reluctant to commit their thoughts to writing on the basis that it was more
difficult to withdraw or retract a comment; they were afraid of being “wrong” and of
being “judged” on their contribution.

20. Shyness – three tutors reported shyness as a barrier to participation, however this was
generally overcome with encouragement and time.

21. Application of knowledge – this was one of the roles of a discussion forum for two
tutors. The forum was used a medium by which the student could demonstrate to the
tutor both knowledge and the application of that knowledge.

22. Critiquing – in two tutors’ courses it was important the students learn how to critique
others’ work. The discussion forums were the medium used to facilitate this
critiquing practice and for the tutor to provide feedback on the levels of critical
thinking in the critique.

23. Cultural – this theme was raised by two tutors and related to cultural differences – one
tutor wondered how much a preference for oral learning could impact the students’
use of, and learning from, discussion forums, the second tutor thought a self-effacing
Kiwi culture impacted negatively on participation.

24. Discovery learning – this was a technique employed by two tutors, who asked their
students to follow a particular exercise or action and then to report back to the forum
their findings and what they have learnt from the exercise.

25. Forum traffic – two tutors identified the level of forum traffic as being critical, having
too little was an indication of low participation and poor commitment, while having
too much could mean the students were spending too much time catching up with
postings and this could be off-putting for those students that had left their
participation in a particular forum a little late.

26. Impersonal nature of the medium – this was identified by two tutors as a potential
barrier to participation early in a course, however one tutor who thought this was a
barrier also reported that most students had not found it a problem once their
keyboarding and literacy skills improved. One tutor also believed it was easier for
misunderstandings to occur in this type of medium, presumably because some of the other communication cues are missing.

27. Iterative learning – two tutors identified using a cyclic process in the forums they use to reinforce learning, using the iterative process to build up the level of required knowledge for the student.

28. Participation a pre-requisite to marks – this was a technique used to encourage student participation (by two tutors) in that while not placing marks directly on participation, it was nevertheless a pre-requisite to be met before other marks could be awarded.

29. Poor written communication skills – this was seen (by two tutors) in two different ways, as in students with poor literacy, not being able to spell or use correct grammar, and as in students taking a lot of time to write a paragraph that articulated well what they wanted to say. In the second instance one tutor was saying that although a paragraph of text written in a discussion forum can be read and assimilated in a short space of time, to write (and maybe re-write) that paragraph takes a student with poor writing skills considerably longer.

30. Restrictive course prescriptions – two tutors observed that it was difficult aligning a course that had rigid prescriptive assessment procedures with an online version, which severely restricted the uses that discussion forums could be put to.

31. Safe learning environment – this technique was discussed by two tutors who noted that students performed best and were more willing to participate and share their ideas/experiences in an environment where they felt they would not be unfairly or harshly treated.

32. Same techniques as face-to-face – one tutor used the same techniques in online discussions as they would in a face-to-face discussion and went so far as to say they saw very little difference between a forum and a tutorial.

33. Students sharing experiences – using the forums to interact and share ideas with each other. This theme was mentioned by one tutor in the context of the students having only the course materials available as a resource without a class group to interact
The tutor mentioned that the ability for students to bring in and share their own experiences (work and practice) contributed to their learning.

34. Tutor responsiveness – timeliness and “tone” of tutors’ responses to posting was seen to be important to students. This was one of the techniques two tutors were consciously using, and one of these tutors also likened the process to communication in general and being in touch as much as possible.

35. Alignment of forum to course aims – one tutor thought that the effectiveness of a forum and the willingness of students to participate in a forum were related to how well the forum’s purpose matched the course aims. This tutor brought this theme up in several different places in the interview, so clearly it was a major issue. The tutor emphasised the students’ perspective of a forum appearing as an “optional extra” and not being relevant to the course.

36. Alternative communication media available – one tutor found that a group of students that were in the same town doing the same course preferred to meet face-to-face and set up their own discussion group outside of the online course. The tutor did not discourage this as the discussion group achieved the same learning outcomes as if they had used the online discussion forum, and in fact may have done better.

37. Assessment tool – in one case discussion forums were used as an assessment tool to ease the assessment workload on the tutor.

38. Common room social forums – one tutor set up social discussion forums for their classes that spanned several different courses purely to increase the social interaction and for the more experienced students to offer support for those students commencing their online studies.

39. Computer literacy – this was reported by one tutor as being a possible barrier to participation, so this tutor made computer literacy a stated requirement for enrolling in the course.

40. Critical mass – one tutor had experimented with breaking their class into groups of four for the discussion forums and found that the reduced size of the group impacted negatively on participation and quality of content.
41. Debates – one tutor split the class into two groups and had each group present the pros and cons of a particular point of view using the discussion forum as the communication medium.

42. Discussion closure – one tutor thought it important to wind up a discussion forum properly with the tutor adding value to the discussion. The closure brought a sense of fulfilment to the students, having accomplished and completed part of the course.

43. Help-desk support – this was a strategy proposed by one tutor to mitigate some of the effects of students meeting a technological barrier when trying to participate in online learning.

44. Lack of tutor interest – this theme, mentioned by one tutor, ties in with some of the other themes mentioned in that a lack of interest from the tutor will result in inadequate feedback to the student, no encouragement and poor response times.

45. Low participation by peers – one tutor believed that low participation from other students could be de-motivating for a student and therefore having an impact on the student’s own participation.

46. Motivation – the was mentioned indirectly by the one tutor who thought low participation by other students could be de-motivating for a student and that the student needed to be motivated in order to participate.

47. No assessment – one tutor thought that not having an assessment weighting on the discussion forums was “a barrier to participation”. While not being a barrier in itself it could result in a lack of incentive which would have the same impact.

48. Over-confidence – one tutor felt that over-confidence could be a barrier to learning in that the students were often not aware of their own shortcomings in their approach to learning at a tertiary level.

49. Pace – one tutor thought the pace of the course was a factor in participation levels with students who are falling behind being “embarrassed” at posting to a week one forum when the class had in fact moved onto week three. The issue here is not really pace but the fact that some students are being left behind, this could be caused by pace but it could also be caused by other factors.
50. Participation required for learning – one tutor clearly co-related participation with learning, indicating that learning cannot occur without participation.

51. Poor discussion topic – one tutor thought the choice of discussion topic was critical to how students approached the forum. This is a similar theme to “alignment of forum to course goals” in point 35 above but differs in the sense that even if the topic of the forum is aligned to the course goals it may still be a poor topic for a discussion forum.

52. Preferred communication medium – one tutor actively promoted the forum as the preferred media for communication as opposed to email, chat sessions and telephone calls.

53. Prior experience – one tutor identified students’ prior experience as important. This experience was related to course subject matter and whether the student was coming into the course with work or life experiences that included that subject matter. The tutor felt that students understood more of what was being put forward in a discussion forum if they could relate it to prior knowledge.

54. Summarising discussions – this was a strategy employed to increase participation levels, especially in subsequent forums. One tutor demonstrated interest and commitment to the class by making a point of reading every posting, summarising a week’s discussion into the salient points and re-focusing the students on the main topic or goal of the forum, in the process preventing discussions from meandering aimlessly.

55. Working students to their strengths – one tutor used forums to individually direct students towards tasks that were best suited to the students’ particular strengths.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>J</th>
<th>K</th>
<th>L</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Reflective practice</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Interactivity between students</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Questioning</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Technology</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Alternative media</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Encouragement</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Student interaction with tutor</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Discourse</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Feedback, student to student</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Feedback, tutor to student</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Life pressures</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Online community building</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Authenticity and creativity</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Incremental raising of the bar</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Lack of confidence</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Main teaching tool</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Modelling forum practice</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Reinforce reading</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Reluctance to commit thoughts to writing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Shyness</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Application of knowledge</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Critiquing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Cultural</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Discovery learning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Forum traffic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Impersonal nature of medium</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Iterative learning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Participation a pre-requisite to marks</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Poor written communication skills</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Restrictive course prescriptions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. Safe learning environment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. Same techniques as for face-to-face</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. Students sharing experiences</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. Tutor responsiveness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. Alignment of forum to course aims</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. Alternative communication media available</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. Assessment tool</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. Common room social forums</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. Computer literacy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. Critical mass</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. Debates</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. Discussion closure</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43. Help desk support</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44. Lack of tutor interest</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45. Low participation by peers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46. Motivation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47. No assessment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48. Over-confidence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49. Pace</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50. Participation required for learning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51. Poor discussion topic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52. Preferred communication medium</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53. Prior experience</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54. Summarising discussions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55. Working students to their strengths</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.7. Summary

This chapter reports on the raw results of the data obtained from the interviews. Also shown are the themes from a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, with a brief description of each and the number of occurrences of the theme in the interviews.
5. Analysis

5.1. Introduction

This chapter contains an analysis of the results found in chapter four.

Section 5.2 presents a thematic analysis of the themes found in the interviews. The themes were then analysed for common threads and each was classified accordingly.

Section 5.3 consolidates all of the strategies used by tutors to encourage participation and deeper learning in discussion forums with those that come directly from question 17 of the interview. This larger group of strategies was then classified into sub-categories.

Section 5.4 compares the themes found across the differing demographic groups within the interviewees to ascertain whether there were patterns apparent.

Section 5.5 compares barriers with strategies used and also relates the barriers to those found in the literature review.

5.2. Theme classification

The themes were classified into three main groupings: pedagogy, barriers and strategies. Figures 1, 2 and 3 display the categories graphically and in each of these the oval and font sizes are a rough indication of how often the theme was mentioned by the tutors.
5.2.1. Pedagogy

Figure 1 shows the themes related to pedagogy that were derived from the interviews where the tutors talked about teaching principles and practice. They were not mentioned explicitly as strategies for encouraging participation in forums but were teaching and learning practices the tutor aspired to. Themes of a similar nature are grouped.

Figure 1: Pedagogical themes
5.2.2. Barriers

Barriers to participation and learning are shown in Figure 2. Some of the barriers are grouped together as being quite similar, for example self-confidence, shyness and a reluctance to commit thoughts to writing are closely linked.

Figure 2: Barrier themes
5.2.3. Strategies

Themes relating to strategies (to increase participation) are shown in Figure 3. Strategies that are similar are grouped together.

Figure 3: Strategy themes
5.3. **All strategies**

After reviewing the themes it was found that in the general context of the interviews the tutors actually mentioned strategies that were additional to those given as answers to question 17 of the interview. With the results of question 17 added to the strategy themes and the duplicates removed, the full picture in terms of the strategies that the tutors used in discussion forums is shown in Table 6 below. The “same techniques as face-to-face” strategy has been removed from the list as it was too generalised. The strategies are listed in order of the number of times they were mentioned.

**Table 6: All strategies discussed by tutors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback, tutor to student</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online community building</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modelling forum practice</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforce reading</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation a pre-requisite for marks</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe learning environment</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutor responsiveness</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common room social forums</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debates</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forum closure</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help-desk support</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main teaching tool</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making the forum a resource</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive reinforcement</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred communication medium</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scaffolding</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarising discussions</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working students to their strengths</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These strategies fall under different categories as shown in Figure 4 below. The proportion of each group to the total is shown in Figure 5.
Figure 4: Classification of strategies
5.3.1. Affective strategies

There were 23 occurrences of affective strategies. These strategies were those used to alter the students’ attitudes and feelings towards the discussion forums. A sub-group within this category was the motivational strategies such as encouragement, positive reinforcement, making participation a pre-requisite for marks and assessment. These are extrinsic motivational strategies. The other affective strategies were those centred on the students’ well being such as online community building, the use of common room social forums, promoting a safe learning environment, tutor responsiveness and feedback from the tutor.

5.3.2. Cognitive strategies

There were 17 occurrences of cognitive strategies. These strategies were those that encouraged greater thinking, reading and discourse. The summarising of discussions and forum closure were also included here as, while the thinking may have been done by the tutor, the goal was to give the students a synthesised concise summary of the discussion.

5.3.3. Resourcing strategies

The resourcing category holds four strategies centred on how the tutors used the discussion forum tool and were not directly related to the cognitive or affective strategies. The strategies were; using the forums as the main teaching tool, the preferred communication medium, making the forum a resource and providing help-desk support.
5.4. Comparison of themes with demographic data

It is worth looking at which groups of tutors responded with what themes and whether their level of response was in line with their representation in the sample.

5.4.1. Gender differences

The total number of themes discussed in the interviews was 137. Of these 95 were brought up by female tutors and 42 by the male tutors. Weighting these responses against the proportion of female to male tutors (8:4) it became apparent that the female tutors expressed a slightly greater range of ideas in the interviews. Males responded with a total of 42 themes, a percentage of 31%, yet they represented 33% of the sample. Females responded with a total of 95 themes, a percentage of 69%, and their representation in the sample was 67%.

Tables 7 and 8 below show gender differences in themes and show only those themes with a proportional response of 50% or over (the proportional response is the number of tutors mentioning a theme divided by the number of tutors within the group being analysed, expressed as a percentage);

Table 7: Themes discussed by females

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative media</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Themes discussed by males

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online community building</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life pressures</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrictive course prescriptions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student interaction with tutor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of note is the emphasis that the male tutors appeared to place on community building and interactions between students, whereas the female tutors appeared to be more concerned with technological barriers and with using questioning techniques to encourage participation and elicit responses from their students.

5.4.2. Subject area

Grouping the tutors by subject area is not useful as there was only one group of any size (social work with four) and the remaining groups had just the one or two tutors. Trying to find comparisons between these groups with minimal representation in the sample would not be of any value.

However, looking at the total number of themes developed by each group is worthwhile (Table 9). The two groups returning the highest number of discussed themes are the applied writing, social work and religious studies tutors. Nursing and information systems mentioned the least, with business management in between the two groups.

Table 9: Themes from each subject area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Area</th>
<th>No. of themes</th>
<th>Themes per tutor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Applied Writing</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Management</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Systems</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Studies</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>14.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given that the female tutors mentioned the proportionally greater number of themes as shown in Tables 7 and 8 it is of no surprise that the tutors in the applied writing and social work subject areas (in which all the tutors were female) also brought up a significant number of themes. However, the religious studies tutor was male and also contributed a higher than average number of themes. Whether this is significant is hard to show with only one tutor in that group.

5.4.3. Experience

With only one tutor having between two and four years experience with discussion forums, the ranges for experience were reduced to two options, four years and greater,
and less than four years. There were six tutors in each group. The tutors having
greater experience responded with more themes at 76 with the less experienced group
having 61. Tables 10 and 11 show the themes that were found with a proportional
representation of 50% or over in the two groups of tutors;

Table 10: Themes discussed by experienced tutors (4 years and greater)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>No. of themes</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative media</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student interaction with tutor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback, student to student</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modelling forum practice</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11: Themes discussed by less experienced tutors (less than 4 years)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>No. of themes</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The tutors with less experience mentioned technological barriers more often, whilst
those with more experience placed more emphasis on the need for encouraging
reflective practice.

Further investigation to see if there was evidence of a correlation between the number
of themes mentioned and the years of online teaching experience reveals no
significant correlation as shown in Figure 6.
5.4.4. Levels of importance placed on forums in teaching

The themes most discussed by tutors who felt that discussion forums had a major impact on the way they teach are shown in Table 12. Nine tutors were in this category. Included are only those themes discussed by 50% or more of the respondents.

Table 12: Themes most discussed by tutors who felt that forums were important to the way they teach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not surprising is the presence of three major pedagogical themes in Table 12. These tutors appear to use and appreciate the pedagogical features that forums offer.

The themes mentioned by tutors who rated discussion forums as equal in importance to the other teaching techniques they use are shown in Table 13. The number of tutors in this group was only three.
Table 13: Themes discussed by tutors for whom discussion forums are equal to other methods in their teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Equal</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discourse</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback, student to student</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reluctance to commit thoughts to writing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe learning environment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student interaction with tutor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the number of tutors in this category is low, the first two themes above could indicate that these tutors had more difficulty getting participation from the students and also do not get deep meaningful discussion even when the students do post something.

5.4.5. Levels of importance placed on forums in learning

The themes most discussed by tutors who felt that discussion forums had a major impact on the way students learn are shown in Table 14. Eleven tutors were in this category. Included are only those themes mentioned by 50% or more of the respondents.

Table 14: Themes most discussed by tutors who felt that forums were important in the way students learn

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The information that can be derived from this analysis is limited due to the high proportion (11/12) of tutors that responded with the “important” option. The results are a reflection of the sample.
Table 15: Themes discussed by the tutor who felt that forums were equal with other modes of learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Complete</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical mass</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforce reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students sharing experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working students to their strengths</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparing tables 14 and 15 shows three themes in common, “reflective practice”, “questioning” and “technology”. However, four different themes show: “Critical mass”, “Debates”, “Reinforce reading”, and “Working students to their strengths”. Missing is the “Interactivity between students” theme. The significance of this is difficult to show with only the one tutor presenting with this data.

5.4.6. Online component of tutors’ teaching

The eight tutors that taught completely online responded with the themes in Table 16. Only those themes that 50% or more of the tutors in this group responded with are shown. The total themes from this group numbered 101, an average of nearly 13 themes per tutor.

Table 16: Themes from tutors who taught completely online

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Complete</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative media</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student interaction with tutor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of interest is the high proportion of tutors who were using questioning techniques and encouraging reflective practices. Contrasting with these results are those from the four tutors who taught only partially online as shown in Table 17 below.
Table 17: Themes from tutors who taught partially online

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Partial</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of confidence</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforce reading</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrictive course prescriptions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questioning techniques and encouraging reflective practices did not feature as prominently for those tutors who were not teaching exclusively online.

5.4.7. Academic level

Comparing the themes found and the various academic levels that the tutors taught at is somewhat complicated as some tutors taught at more than the one level. One tutor taught across undergraduate diploma, undergraduate degree and postgraduate levels, while another taught at undergraduate diploma and postgraduate levels. Where a tutor taught at more than one level the themes they brought up may be included in all the levels they teach. Taking only those themes with a substantive representation across all the tutors there are slight differences as shown in Tables 18, 19 and 20.

Looking at the total number of themes expressed by each group, the six undergraduate diploma tutors had 76 with an average of nearly 13 per tutor, the five undergraduate degree tutors had 46 with an average of 9 per tutor and the five postgraduate tutors had 72 with an average of 14 per tutor.

Table 18: Themes discussed by undergraduate diploma level tutors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Undergraduate Diploma</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternative media</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student interaction with tutor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback, student to student</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life pressures</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modelling forum practice</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online community building</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 19: Themes discussed by undergraduate degree level tutors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Undergraduate Degree</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 20: Themes discussed by postgraduate tutors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Post Graduate</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative media</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life pressures</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reluctance to commit thoughts to writing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student interaction with tutor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All groups placed some emphasis on student interaction and encouraging reflective practice. The undergraduate diploma tutors were more likely to use alternative media in their online courses. Only the postgraduate tutors placed much emphasis on technology being a barrier.

5.4.8. English as a second language

Tables 21, 22 and 23 show the themes discussed by tutors with no ESL students, a small number of ESL students and a moderate number of ESL students in their courses. Only those themes mentioned by 50% or more of the tutors in each group are shown.

Table 21: Themes from tutors with no ESL students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life pressures</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online community building</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student interaction with tutor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The five tutors with no ESL students seemed primarily concerned with having the students participating at an adequate level. They also recognised the need for interactivity and an online community.

**Table 22: Themes from tutors with a small number of ESL students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Slight</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative media</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The six tutors who had a small number of ESL students were more likely to use questioning techniques to extract further work from the students, they were also concerned with technology being a barrier and more prepared to use alternate media for delivery and teaching. The emphasis on student interaction and reflective practice is less than that shown in Table 21.

**Table 23: Themes from the tutor with a moderate component of ESL students**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Application of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment tool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity and creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback, tutor to student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online community building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforce reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrictive course prescriptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shyness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was only the one tutor who reported a moderate number of ESL students. This tutor used the forums for assessment and required the students to demonstrate application of knowledge within the forums. Themes on online community building and reflective practice were also present. The overall impression from this grouping of themes is a degree of control or framework employed by the tutor over the students through the forums.
5.4.9. Prime role

For each of the prime roles for discussion forums that were identified by the tutors the total number of themes was found that each tutor who identified that prime role also mentioned, as shown in Table 24. Not included in the total is where the theme is the same as the prime role. Included in the table is the number of times each role was identified by the respondents and a column showing the average number of themes introduced for each occurrence of a role. The table is sorted by the average number of themes per incidence of a role in descending order.

Table 24: Themes found for each prime role

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prime Role</th>
<th>Incidence of role</th>
<th>No. of themes</th>
<th>No. of themes per incidence of role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critiquing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community building</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main teaching tool</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback mechanism</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforce reading</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate interactions</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the community building role had the higher number of theme references by the same tutors it is not too surprising as it was mentioned by four tutors. In the same vein, the critiquing role was only mentioned by two tutors, yet those two tutors also brought up 32 themes. What can be drawn from the data is that those tutors who used the forums for critiquing and community building tended to come up with more themes in the interviews.

5.4.10. Face-to-face teaching sessions on the use of the LMS

Five tutors ran face-to-face teaching sessions to introduce students to the learning management system and how to use the discussion forum tools. The themes discussed by more than half of the tutors in this group are shown in Table 25.
Table 25: Themes mentioned by those tutors who run face-to-face introductory teaching sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main teaching tool</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only four themes were found that more than 50% of the tutors in this group discussed. On closer scrutiny this group of tutors responded with a total of 43 themes with an average of eight per tutor.

Seven tutors did not run face-to-face introductory teaching sessions. Table 26 lists the themes that more than half of this group mentioned.

Table 26: Themes mentioned by those tutors who do not run face-to-face introductory teaching sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life pressures</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online community building</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The seven tutors not running face-to-face introductory teaching sessions responded with a total of 88 themes, with an average of just over 12.5 themes per tutor. Strangely this group identified technology as a possible barrier yet did not run any face-to-face session introducing the students to the technology. The difference between these two groups is so marked that it is worth considering whether other factors are of any influence. The other grouping that produced a difference in the number of themes mentioned was that of gender. Breaking the groups above into their separate genders shows four females and one male in the group that did run face-to-face sessions, and four females and three males in the group that did not run these sessions. This result goes against the trend of the female group returning a greater number of trends and indicates perhaps that those tutors who do not or cannot run
face-to-face introductory sessions are more concerned with the manner in which the forums should operate.

5.4.11. Use of introductions and ice-breakers

Ten of the twelve tutors chose to run icebreaker and introduction discussion forums at the beginning of their online courses. Tables 27 and 28 show the themes discussed by at least 50% of the tutors in groups of those running icebreakers and those not.

Table 27: Themes from those tutors running icebreakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative media</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student interaction with tutor</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This group mentioned a total of 121 themes with an average of twelve themes per tutor. The size of this group compared to the number of tutors in the overall sample means that these themes are generally indicative of the sample.

Table 28: Themes from those tutors not running icebreakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforce reading</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of knowledge</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment tool Main teaching tool</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity and creativity</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback, tutor to student</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of confidence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main teaching tool</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No assessment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online community building</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrictive course prescriptions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shyness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The tutors not running icebreakers mentioned a total of 16 themes, with an average of eight per tutor. The tutors here seemed more concerned with shyness and self-
confidence being barriers and with online community building, which is somewhat at odds with their decision not to run icebreakers. Also apparent is the prescriptive nature of themes on reinforcing reading, assessment and application of knowledge. Unfortunately with only the two tutors in this group the significance of these findings is questionable.

5.4.12. Use of moderation

None of the tutors moderated their discussion forums which makes a differentiation of themes based on moderation impossible.

5.4.13. Encouragement of reflective practices

All but one of the tutors answered in the positive for this question, so it is highly likely that the themes that these mentioned are representative of the sample. The themes mentioned by the one tutor who did not encourage reflective practice are shown in Table 28

Table 29: Themes mentioned by the tutor who did not encourage reflective practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternative communication media available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovery learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor written communication skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shyness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What are apparent for this particular tutor are the concerns she had for students using other (probably oral) media for communication, possibly because of poor written skills and technological barriers. The interview indicates the tutor felt the students were not quite ready to be asked to reflect on their own or other students’ work. This tutor taught at the undergraduate degree level.

5.4.14. Assessment of participation

The tutors interviewed were split evenly in terms of whether they assessed participation or not. The question was quite explicit in making certain that only participation was being assessed, not quality or content of contribution. Nearly equal
numbers of themes were mentioned by each, 68 for those tutors that assessed participation and 69 for those who did not. Themes presented by more than 50% of the tutors in each group are shown in Tables 30 and 31 below.

Table 30: Themes from tutors that assessed participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative media</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity and creativity</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online community building</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student interaction with tutor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Obvious omissions from the themes in Table 30 are those themes that encourage participation. It seems that when tutors are assessing for participation there is no problem getting the students to do so, however, the tutors are asking the students to go further by encouraging reflective practice. “Barrier” type themes were of very little interest to this group, the implication is that tutors believe students will overcome barriers given enough incentive.

Table 31: Themes from tutors that did not assess participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reluctance to commit thoughts to writing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The six tutors that do not assess participation appear to be using techniques such as encouragement and questioning to elicit responses from the students. Without the added stimulus of assigning marks for participation it would seem that reluctance to committing thoughts to writing becomes a barrier. The two themes in common, encouraging reflective practice and the interactivity between students, feature commonly in other groupings and their presence is not unexpected.
5.4.15. Assessment of contribution

Five tutors assessed contribution. These tutors also assessed for participation, consequently the themes mentioned by the two groups are similar as shown in Table 32 below. A total of 61 themes with an average of twelve come from the group that assessed contribution.

Table 32: Themes from tutors that assessed contribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative media</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity and creativity</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online community building</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the assessment of contribution there appears to be little need for the strategies that encourage participation, and also not much mention made of the barriers that a student may face.

Seven tutors did not assess contribution; the most commonly reported themes are shown in Table 33. These tutors mentioned 76 themes with an average of eleven, the same average as in the previous group.

Table 33: Themes from tutors that did not assess contribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactivity between students</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These themes are almost identical to those that tutors brought up who did not assess participation. The same comments apply, that is that strategies are needed to elicit responses from the students and that tutors believe that technological barriers may be the reason students are not contributing.
5.5. **Analysis of barriers and strategies**

5.5.1. Matching “barriers to participation” to strategies

Looking at the barriers to participation as perceived by the tutors and cross-referencing these to the strategies the same tutors employed to increase participation presents some interesting details. From Table 34 below it can be seen that one third of the tutors used encouragement as a technique to increase participation and identified lack of confidence as a barrier. One third (not necessarily the same tutors) identified technology as a barrier and used encouragement, and a third identified life pressures as a barrier and also used encouragement.

Table 34: Matching “barriers to participation” to strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers to participation</th>
<th>Encouragement</th>
<th>Questioning</th>
<th>Feedback</th>
<th>Forum closure</th>
<th>Modelling forum behaviour</th>
<th>Safe learning environment</th>
<th>Positive reinforcement</th>
<th>Making the forum a resource</th>
<th>Scaffolding</th>
<th>Setting up debates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life pressures</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of confidence</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer literacy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of tutor interest</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor discussion topic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-confidence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative communication media available</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor written communication skills</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low participation by peers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No assessment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Graphing the above data in a stacked column graph (Figure 7) it becomes apparent that those tutors that identified technology, lack of confidence and life pressures as barriers to participation also used more strategies in their work within the forums.
5.5.2. Matching “barriers to learning” to strategies

Looking at the barriers to learning as perceived by the tutors and cross-referencing these to the strategies the same tutors employed presents a less clear picture (Table 35).
Table 35: Matching “barriers to learning” to strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers to learning</th>
<th>Encouragement</th>
<th>Questioning</th>
<th>Feedback</th>
<th>Forum closure</th>
<th>Modelling forum behaviour</th>
<th>Safe learning environment</th>
<th>Positive reinforcement</th>
<th>Making the forum a resource</th>
<th>Scaffolding</th>
<th>Setting up debates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior experience</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low participation by self</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forum traffic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of reflection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of confidence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low participation by peers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impersonal nature of medium</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shyness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textual nature of forums</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Graphing the above data in a stacked column graph (Figure 8) it can be seen that those tutors that mentioned a lack of prior experience as a barrier to learning also appeared to employ the most strategies in their forum work.
5.5.3. Alignment of individual tutor’s strategies to barriers

Barriers to participation and learning were asked for in questions 15 and 16 of the interviews. Also asked for (in question 17) were any strategies that the tutor used in discussion forums with the aim of encouraging participation, worthwhile contribution and critical reflection. This question was asked in general terms and not specifically searching for strategies that were aimed at overcoming the barriers in questions 15 and 16. It is worthwhile examining each tutor’s response to see if in fact the strategies they purported to use were aimed at the barriers they perceived. For this analysis the barriers to participation and learning are grouped together; the results are shown in Table 36.
Table 36: Matching tutors' individual barriers to strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tutor</th>
<th>Barriers</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Computer literacy, vulnerability</td>
<td>Questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Technology, confidence, impersonal nature of the medium</td>
<td>Encouragement, modelling forum behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Alternative means of interaction available, shyness, cultural</td>
<td>Questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>No assessment, shyness, lack of confidence</td>
<td>Feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Technology, lack of confidence</td>
<td>Questioning, setting up debates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Technology, computer literacy, lack of confidence, life pressures, low participation by self, low participation by peers</td>
<td>Encouragement, questioning, feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Life pressures, poor discussion topic, lack of tutor interest, forum traffic</td>
<td>Encouragement, feedback, forum closure, modelling forum behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Technology, life pressures, prior experience</td>
<td>Encouragement, questioning, feedback, safe learning environment, positive reinforcement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Technology, lack of confidence, low participation by self</td>
<td>Encouragement, questioning, modelling forum behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Life pressures, low participation by peers</td>
<td>Encouragement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>Technology, textual nature of forums</td>
<td>Making the forum a resource</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Lack of confidence, cultural, poor written communication skills, over-confidence, prior experience, lack of reflection</td>
<td>Encouragement, questioning, scaffolding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The strategies mentioned by seven tutors (B, F, G, H, I, J & L) matched strategies to barriers reasonably well, three tutors’ (C, D & K) strategies did not match quite so well, and two tutors’ (A & E) strategies did not match at all. To be fair to the tutors, they were not aware that the strategies they proposed may be compared with the barriers they reported.
5.5.4. Comparisons of the barriers reported by the tutors with those found in the literature review

When comparing the barriers reported by the tutors with those found in the literature review in chapter two it was found that eleven of the 20 barriers could be mapped directly to some of those in the literature (Table 37). On the other hand, 13 of the 21 barriers found in the literature could be mapped back to those the tutors reported.

Table 37: Comparing tutors’ barriers with the literature review barriers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tutors’ barriers</th>
<th>Literature review barriers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior experience</td>
<td>Student inexperience with cooperative learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative means of interaction available</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor written communications skills</td>
<td>Poor written communication skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer literacy</td>
<td>Computer literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of confidence</td>
<td>Lack of confidence, including not wanting to appear ignorant online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impersonal nature of medium</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forum traffic</td>
<td>High volume of reading and replies, large group size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of reflection</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of tutor interest</td>
<td>Instructor presence/support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instructor beliefs and expectations, in the way in which they influence the value that the students place on the discussion forum tool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life pressures</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low participation by peers</td>
<td>Feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low participation by self</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No assessment</td>
<td>Lack of assessment of collaborative learning tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-confidence</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor discussion topic</td>
<td>Poorly designed courses and activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relevance to other course activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shyness</td>
<td>Shyness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textual nature of forums</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerability</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—</td>
<td>Distracted discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—</td>
<td>Dominated discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—</td>
<td>Public evaluations of individual learners</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Examining the nine barriers that were mentioned by the tutors and not found in the literature review it was found that some could be a partial match with generalised barriers found in the literature. The barriers “Alternative means of interaction available”, “Life pressures” and “Low participation by self” all have some motivational context. “Vulnerability” could encompass the literature review barriers of “lack of confidence” and “shyness”. Where tutors believe students have a problem with the “impersonal nature of the medium” and “textual nature of the medium” the underlying cause could be that the students have “poor written communication skills” and cannot articulate well in the written environment. “Cultural” and “over-confidence” barriers are related to the “students’ behaviours, attitudes and preconceptions of learning” barrier found in the literature. This leaves the only tutor reported barrier that has no match in the literature as “lack of reflection”. This is probably not surprising as it is a generic barrier applicable to all learning and material covered in the literature is focusing more on barriers pertinent to online learning.

This leaves five barriers found in the literature review that have no match to those the tutors considered. These were: “distracted discussions”, “dominated discussions”, “public evaluation of individual learners”, “unwillingness by students to share informational resources” and “gender differences and the balance of genders in a forum”. Public evaluation of individual learners was a common practice for the applied writing tutors and while it did not go as far as making a student’s mark available to the class, the student’s work was certainly open for public critique by the tutor. This was not seen as a barrier by these tutors. Distracted and/or dominated discussions could certainly be barriers but there were references to these at all. A possible reason for this is that these barriers probably show themselves only in forums with a reasonable level of activity and the tutors may have been focusing on barriers aligned with low participation. There was no evidence in the interviews that gender
differences might affect learning outcomes from discussion forums, and in fact there was only the one reference to this barrier in the literature review.

5.6. Summary

This chapter analysed the results reported in chapter. The themes were examined and classified into three groups: pedagogy, barriers and strategies. Strategies were themselves categorised into resourcing, cognitive and affective groups. The demographic data were used to differentiate the types of themes mentioned by the different groups of tutors, and differences of significance were discussed.

The barriers to participation and to learning, mentioned by the tutors, were examined to determine alignment with strategies, across all the interviews and also for each tutor.

Finally, the barriers mentioned by the tutors were cross-referenced to those found in the literature and the differences and omissions were discussed.
6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings from the analysis of the interview data and compares these findings with those in the literature review. Differences and agreements are noted, and conclusions drawn. The strategies found in answer to the first research question are examined and evidence coming from the tutors of these strategies fulfilling the requirements of the second research question is identified.

The implications of this research are discussed and possible further research topics put forward.

6.2. Pedagogy

The pedagogical implications of discussion forums seem to have been appreciated by the tutors interviewed. There is evidence from the themes found in the interviews of the tutors attempting to achieve “active engagement”, “articulation”, “feedback” and “communication”—all the ingredients for current tertiary learning and teaching as proposed by Collis (1998, p. 375). Some of the comments in the interviews that support this are:

Tutor A—“Because it’s that participation and the reflective practice that makes them learn”.

Tutor B—“that’s where they put their ideas down and give and receive feedback with each other and with me”, “that’s exactly how we work, that is what they are, reflective”.

Tutor C—regarding discussions and interaction in general, “I think it’s essential in the way they learn, whether they do it online or not”.

Tutor F—“an opportunity to get that experience of critiquing peer work and thought, to be able to have discussions, interactions and hear a broader range of views than can possibly come from the lecturer”.

Fostering a sense of social community within an online class with the goal of “generating intellectual camaraderie” (Haavind, 2007, p.48) was recognised and
attempted by 10 of 12 of the respondents. In the analysis of those tutors not running introductions and icebreakers at the start of their course it was found the same tutors had greater concerns regarding shyness and self-confidence as barriers to participation and also focused on strengthening the online community. While they did not initially run introductions and icebreakers there was still the understanding that having an online community in the class was conducive to learning. Two of the tutors ran specific discussion forums for the duration of the course that were dedicated to students’ social networking (this arose from student requests as part of the evaluation process for the courses).

When analysing the themes by gender it was found that at the top of the list of themes for male tutors were the importance of interactivity between students and online community building. However these themes did not feature among those themes most mentioned by the female tutors. There are two possible explanations for this. Either the males are placing importance on these because they are aware of their (stereotyped?) shortcomings (and the females do not because they believe it is natural to them), or the males simply have a greater appreciation of the pedagogical importance of interactivity and online communities.

The issue of adequate student engagement in discussion forums is apparent in many of the interviews. In response to the question on assessment of participation, Tutor A responded positively, saying “Because, you know, we found out that some students just sort of skipped through without actually doing the exercises, without participating.” Tutor F, in response to the question on barriers to learning, said “Not getting around to participating impedes their learning”. Low participation by the student and other students was identified by two tutors as a barrier to learning and was countered by those tutors with strategies of encouragement, questioning and feedback. When tutors were asked what they thought the barriers to participation could be the response was quite well defined. The three barriers that stood out are technology, lack of confidence and life pressures. An analysis of the strategies discussed by all the tutors that identified these three barriers reveals that these tutors also used the most strategies to increase participation. Encouragement was the predominant strategy.
Assessment of both participation (six tutors) and contribution (five tutors) featured but for differing pedagogical reasons. The main reason was to enforce participation. In two cases (Tutors A & B) participation was a pre-requisite for the assessment of contribution: the student’s work would not be marked unless they had participated adequately. In the other four cases where participation was assessed there was a mark allocated for it. The second reason coincided with one of the prime roles of the discussion forum and that was as an assessment tool that helped reduce the tutor’s marking workload (Tutor D). When asked why he assessed contribution, Tutor G’s response was “Because we think that it is important that students just don’t put words, but quality words online, the sorts of words that facilitate further conversation, the sort of words that show that they have reflected seriously”. None of the tutors who assessed contribution believed authenticity of students’ work to be an issue.

An interesting comment made by Tutor H that she can “definitely feel that you do need to assess to make some people value it” raises the question of how do tutors get across to students that their participation and contributions to a discussion forum are valued. This perception of “value” is analogous to the monetary perception of value whereby a higher price indicates (for some people) a higher value. Perhaps assigning marks to participation may be more than merely enforcing participation, but is actually a way of telling the student that their participation is a valuable part of their learning process.

Another result that came out of the analysis of themes mentioned by those tutors that do assess for participation was that this group responded with very few “barrier” type themes (in comparison with those tutors who did not assess). It could be inferred from this is that the tutors either believe or actually find that students overcome many of the barriers with the added incentive of marks.

6.3. **Technology**

The increasing levels of broadband penetration into New Zealand households do not necessarily apply to online discussion forums. One of the many reasons students may take on online study is geographical positioning; they are genuine distance students and often in remote locations where the only Internet connection is via dial-up. Some tutors cited connection issues and the discussion forum software itself as being major
barriers to participation. High volumes of forum traffic have a major impact on a student’s online learning experience when using dial-up.

Three tutors discussed the limitations of a popular LMS and felt that the ease of use of the discussion forum software in this package had worsened in the latest release.

There is a gender imbalance in the reporting of technology as being a barrier to both participation and learning: six of the eight female tutors thought it was a problem while only one of the four males thought so. This trend was further emphasised by Tutor F who stated that “The majority of my students would be women, and not all of them are necessarily computer savvy”. This could be another example of stereotyped positioning similar to the male tutors’ emphasis on student interactivity and community building.

As discussed in section 6.2 above, it is also apparent the tutors believe that the students will overcome technological barriers given enough incentive, such as marks.

Overall the fact that technology featured so prominently in the interviews is surprising. As a comparison, the modern “web” has been available for as long as the cell-phone (which has been taken onboard by young and old alike). Further research that could be done in this area is whether technology has become a scapegoat or a convenient excuse for some people. Maybe it is far easier to blame the technology instead of our own inadequacies. Having said this, two tutors did identify computer literacy as a barrier to participation. It is difficult to assess whether those tutors that mentioned technology actually meant a failing of technology or a failing of the student to understand the technology.

6.4. The tutor

The tutors interviewed appeared to be aware of the tutor skills required in online teaching as outlined by Young and McSporran (2004). These were online community building (how to welcome, encourage, support and control students), discussion activity design and set-up, introduction and closure, moderation and assessment.

Three of the four male tutors mentioned community building while only one of the eight female tutors did so. The possible reasons for this anomaly are discussed in section 6.2. Encouragement featured prominently in the interviews with five of the tutors discussing it as one of the tools they use. Only one tutor identified the
importance of discussion activity set-up and design; if these were poorly done and not related to the goals of the course they could become a barrier to students’ participation.

The tutors’ experience at teaching online had a bearing on the themes they mentioned. Those with less experience emphasised technological barriers slightly more while the experienced tutors focused more on reflective practices. This result could have been a reflection of the fact that the experienced tutors were also teaching at a higher academic level, and this group also mentioned reflective practices more often.

Six of the eight tutors who taught completely online mentioned the themes of reflective practice and questioning strategies. A smaller proportion of the four tutors who did not teach completely online mentioned reflective practice and questioning. This result is in line with reflective practice and questioning being the most frequent and third most frequent themes mentioned by all the tutors, and confirms these practices as being paramount in the thinking of online tutors.

The analysis of themes mentioned by the five tutors who did not run face-to-face teaching sessions in the use of an LMS revealed more incidences of technology as being a possible barrier, when compared with the seven tutors who did run these sessions. A possible conclusion from this result is that the face-to-face teaching sessions were effective as judged by the tutors as they did lessen the tutors’ concerns about technology being a barrier.

None of the tutors actively pre-moderated students’ postings to the degree they were only released to the class after the tutor had read them. The rationale behind this decision seemed to be that their students were adults and it simply was not required. Tutor A commented “if you’re stepping in there moderating, people aren’t learning, so it’s better to discuss something out in the open rather than moderate anything before it’s seen”. Tutor F said that “the student group is such that I would not, because I am dealing with a professional postgraduate community”. It appeared that moderation was seen not only as unnecessary but also possibly counter-productive.

The issue of assessment provided some interesting feedback. The tutors were split evenly between those that assessed participation and those that did not. With the exception of one tutor, all those that assessed participation also assessed contribution. The types of themes most often mentioned by those tutors assessing participation did
not include any of the strategies useful for increasing participation. Encouraging reflective practices did feature for these tutors and a conclusion that could be drawn is that, while making participation assessable worked to some degree, the students still needed to go further with their postings. In contrast, the non-assessing tutors discussed themes more useful for increasing participation.

Where contributions were also assessed there again seemed to be little thought given by the tutors to increasing participation, nor to the barriers that students may face in using discussion forums.

The distinction between discourse and discussions made by Anderson et al. (2001, p. 3) was also made by four of the tutors. Tutor I made the comment that “Sometimes they end up just for questions and answers, and that’s not how we’d like them to be.” Tutor F said “Well, I think that the discussion forums, if they were discussion forums as distinct from posting locations, have in them a really good potential and the people who do shift their game from it being a posting forum to a discussion forum get a lot out of them.” The four tutors recognised that using forums for superficial posting activities was not what they wanted.

6.5. The student

The vulnerability that students may feel when communicating online (Lynch, 2004, p.43) was identified as a barrier to learning by only one tutor. However, themes of a similar nature such as shyness, lack of confidence and a reluctance to commit thoughts to writing featured quite strongly as barriers. Strategies used to counter these appeared to consist of encouragement, feedback to the student, modelling forum practice, online community building, positive reinforcement and safe learning environments.

Exactly what the tutors thought motivated students in discussion forums was not an obvious outcome of the interviews. Motivation was identified as a barrier to participation by one tutor but it would have been useful if the strategies to encourage participation had been more specific. Generic motivational techniques such as encouragement and positive reinforcement were common affective strategies used. The themes recovered from the interviews were mainly centred on extrinsic motivation techniques: questioning, assessment and participation as a pre-requisite for marks.
Personality traits such as shyness did feature in the barriers to learning although the literature indicated they were more like to be a participatory barrier. The literature (Yang & Tang, 2003, p. 103) also suggested that the effect of shyness may be mitigated in the discussion forums. No direct evidence of this was found in the interviews, however, the analysis of those tutors running introductions and icebreakers (ten tutors) and those not (two tutors) reveals that shyness was mentioned by only two tutors in the first group and one in the second. A possible conclusion could be that the running of introductions and ice-breakers does alleviate issues with shyness.

The concept of students working collaboratively within discussion forums came up several times in the interviews. Seven tutors emphasised inter-student activity, four discussed discourse as an ideal use of the forum, two tutors require their students to critique each other’s work, one tutor set up debating teams within a forum and another used the forums for students to share their experiences. Not all of these could be classed as collaborative but they are a start in that direction.

Computer literacy was occasionally referred to in the interviews with it being the fourth listed in the perceived barriers to participation. As discussed in section 6.3 above, the high incidence of technology being perceived as a barrier to participation could be a reflection of the students’ level of knowledge regarding the technology. The tutor may be receiving indications from the students that they were experiencing technical difficulties when participating online, but the cause of these technical difficulties could easily be poor computer literacy.

6.6. Role of the discussion forum

The discussion forum was identified as being important in the way eleven tutors taught in online courses. The forum also featured as the main teaching vehicle for three tutors who concentrated most of their teaching energies on the forums. The predominant uses of the forums were to facilitate interaction, build online communities and provide feedback. These uses indicate a high requirement for participation but not necessarily high levels of content. Less common uses were problem solving, critiquing and as an assessment tool, all of which would not require as much participation but would require the posting of content of reasonable quality. Only one of the uses was didactic and that was to reinforce reading. This result
agreed with the literature review which indicated that discussion forums (as part of online learning) were best suited to the constructivist model of learning (Nisbet, 2004, p. 123).

6.7. Subject matter

The applied writing subject area lent itself quite well to discussion forums, particularly with the way in which both tutors were using the forums. All students’ articles were placed in the discussion forum areas and reviewed/critiqued by the other students as well as, ultimately, the tutor. The textual nature of applied writing requires the students to develop their written communication skills. These same skills also form a major component of the assessments. The overall impression from the interviews of these two tutors was the importance of the interactivity between students and the need for them to see each others’ work.

There were two tutors teaching business management related courses. Both of these were male and both assessed students’ discussion forum work. In general those tutors that did assess discussion forum activity did not discuss many barrier type themes and notably there was very little discussion of technology as a barrier when assessment was present.

The information systems tutor discussed interactivity between students, with the tutor and feedback between students. This tutor taught an information technology course within an information systems qualification and it is noteworthy the emphasis placed on student interaction within a technological subject area. Again, this agrees with the literature in suggesting the greater learning takes place with engagement among the learners.

The two nursing tutors discussed the least number of themes. These two were relatively inexperienced at online teaching, but as shown in Figure 5 (Section 5.3.3) there was no apparent correlation between number of themes discussed by a tutor and their experience at online teaching. The one theme that both tutors mentioned was interactivity between students - which is in keeping with this theme being the second most discussed by all tutors.

Religious studies as a subject seemed well suited to discussion forums. The tutor mentioned themes such as reflective practice, all of the interactivity themes, online community building and modelling forum practice which are also well represented in
the literature. Also discussed were the importance of the tutor summarising discussions regularly, forum closure and the alignment of a forum topic to the course goals.

The ability for students to share experiences in the social work subject area was highlighted by the four tutors in this area. An instruction Tutor E might typically put to the class is “give me an example of this particular thing from your practice”. Tutor F used the forums for students “to get that experience of critiquing peer work and thought”. The social work tutors all taught courses at the postgraduate level with only one tutor also teaching a course at undergraduate diploma level. The strategies of questioning students to elicit more participation and encouraging reflective practice were definitely uppermost for these tutors and possible this is a reflection of the postgraduate level they taught at and the subject matter. Technology was the barrier of most concern to this group, however, these tutors were all female and when analysing the gender differences in the barriers reported it was found that the females mentioned technology barriers more frequently than males (see section 6.3). Whether technology was of concern because of the subject area or because of the tutors’ gender is not known.

6.8. Strategies

The strategies found in the interview data showed the tutors thinking about three different approaches to take within their courses. The affective group of strategies contained ten themes, with the themes within the group being mentioned 23 times. The cognitive group of strategies contained seven themes, with 17 occurrences of being mentioned. There was a third, smaller group with only four themes that were centred on resourcing issues.

With the affective strategies being just over half of all those mentioned (see Figure 5), and the cognitive strategies being not much less, it would seem the tutors interviewed were using a diverse approach to encouraging participation within discussion forums.

Within the affective group of themes there was a motivational sub-group in which encouragement featured strongly, and within the cognitive group questioning was the most common. It was found when matching strategies to “barriers to participation” in section 5.5.1, that the encouragement and questioning strategies were mentioned in conjunction with the barriers of technology, life pressures and lack of confidence.
more than any other combination. Also apparent from the analysis was that those tutors that mentioned these particular barriers also responded with the higher number of themes. These two strategies and three barriers were clearly uppermost in the minds of many of the tutors.

When comparing the strategies each tutor used with the barriers that each responded with it was found that seven tutors’ strategies matched reasonably well, five partially matched, and two tutors’ strategies were not well matched. What did stand out in these results was that those tutors with a partial or poor match of strategies to barriers were not using the appropriate type of strategy (affective, cognitive or resourcing) to counter a particular barrier. The tutors using a more diverse range of strategies are perhaps more likely to find they are addressing the wider range of barriers that the student may face.

There was limited evidence from the types of themes the tutors’ mentioned and in the interviews themselves as to whether the tutors thought the strategies they used were effective. Four of the ten tutors that ran ice-breakers and introductions reported success with these. Shyness was mentioned as a barrier more often by the two tutors who did not run ice-breakers and introductions at the start of the course. This implies that the tutors who did run these may feel they were successful. Likewise, with face-to-face teaching sessions in the use of the LMS, it was found that the tutors that ran these sessions mentioned the technology barrier less often, which again implies they may have been having some degree of success.

6.9. Implications

When considering the number of strategies and themes mentioned by the tutors it is easy to overlook the fact that they were a cumulative total. The final question in the interview asked for strategies: four tutors responded with only one, three with two strategies, three with three, one with four and one with five. Having one third of the interview sample responding with only one strategy implies these tutors are either not thinking of using strategies to counter barriers to participation and learning, or they are of the firm belief that their one strategy approach is a “one size fits all” situation. However, five of the twelve tutors did respond with three or more strategies. These strategies were a mixture of the cognitive and assertive strategies as outlined in section 5.3, and are to be found in the literature. The implications are that perhaps
more attention could be given to tutors undergoing the transition to online teaching, particularly with developing strategies for handling the different types of barriers to participation and learning that impact an online student.

6.10. Conclusion

The techniques that the tutors (participating in this research) used in discussion forums for online classes are varied and mainly concerned with pedagogical domains of cognitive and assertive natures. There were a small number of techniques centred on resourcing issues. Most of these techniques or strategies correspond well to those discussed in the literature. Also corresponding well to those found in the literature are the barriers to participation and learning that the tutors mentioned.

A marked change in strategies occurred when tutors assessed participation and contribution. The type of techniques that encourage participation, and also the “barrier” type themes, were obvious omissions from these tutors’ interviews. The conclusions drawn from this were that tutors may find students participate more when marks are an issue, and also that the tutors believe students will overcome barriers given enough incentive.

Those tutors using a variety of strategies, in both the cognitive and the assertive domains, seemed to have the best chance of mitigating the effects of the barriers the tutors perceived to exist. There was some evidence to show that the tutors believed these strategies were working.

6.11. Further research

As noted in section 6.3 the distinction between what constitutes technological barriers and what is effectively poor computer literacy is worth investigating. It is the author’s view that technology was over-stated as a barrier in this research and that computer literacy may have been under-stated.

Another intriguing result was the emphasis the male tutors placed on student interactivity and community building while the female tutors did not. Why? Should we even expect there to be a difference?
References


Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. How many years have you been using online tools in the course of your teaching?

2. When did you first start using discussion forums in online teaching?

3. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way you teach?(not important, equal with everything else, very important)

4. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way students learn?(not important, equal with everything else, very important)

5. What percentage of your teaching is Online? Blended? Face to face?

6. What levels are the courses you teach online?(Undergraduate diploma or certificate, undergraduate degree, post-graduate)

7. Are the students in the online courses you teach predominantly EFL, if not, what percentage would not be EFL?

8. What is the prime role of discussion forums in your courses?

9. Do you run any face-to-face sessions teaching students how to use the learning management system and how to use a discussion forum? How do you run these?

10. Do you use discussion forums for introductions or icebreakers at the beginning of your online course? How successful are these?

11. Do you moderate any of your discussion forums? Before a posting is released to students? After a posting is released to students? For what reasons?

12. Do you encourage reflective practices in discussion forums? That is, ask students to post submissions that reflect on their own and other students work.

13. Do you assess student participation in any of your online courses? How many? Why?
14. Do you assess student contributions in any of your online courses? How many? Why? Is authenticity of student work an issue?

15. What do you consider the barriers that may impede student participation in discussion forums? Do you have any control over these barriers?

16. What do you consider to be the barriers that may impede student learning in discussion forums?

17. Do you as a tutor have any particular strategies when using discussion forums, particularly when trying to encourage participation, worthwhile contribution and critical reflection?
Appendix B

Interview 1

1. How many years have you been using online tools in the course of your teaching?

[Six and a half.]

2. When did you first start using discussion forums in online teaching?

[Six and a half years. We just started straight with it.]

3. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way you teach? (not important, equal with every thing else, very important).

[Very important.]

4. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way students learn? (not important, equal with every thing else, very important).

[Very important.]

5. What percentage of your teaching is Online? Blended? Face to face?

[100% online.]

6. What levels are the courses you teach online? (Undergraduate diploma or certificate, undergraduate degree, post-graduate).

[Well, I know the levels, I’m not quite sure how they fit in here. Levels 5, 6 and 7, no I don’t teach level 7 so 5 and 6.]

That’s undergraduate diploma

7. Are the students in the online courses you teach predominantly EFL, if not, what percentage would not be EFL?

[Yes, predominantly. The odd one is not.]

Just expanding on that, do you have any international students?

[One in Rarotonga, and, that’s it at the moment I think.]

Mostly New Zealand?

[Yes.]
8. What is the prime role of discussion forums in your courses?

[It’s the actual major form of teaching, we use them to critique and respond to the writing so it’s the students and the tutors all respond. It’s our main venue, yeah it’s one to one teaching and one to one on behalf of the students as well.]

So you’d say it’s between tutor student and student to student participation?

[Yes.]

So it’s not just to enable students to communicate with the tutor?

[No, no, one student will write something and the other students read it and say what they think about it, and the tutor will also give feedback, then the student will rewrite and it’s a process of continuance.]

9. Do you run any face-to-face sessions teaching students how to use the learning management system and how to use a discussion forum? How do you run these?

[Only on the orientation day and that’s with a very small number of our students. Most of the students that is provided for on the CDs, it’s only a very small percentage we do 5% most get it off the CD.]

What is this CD?

[OK, it’s an orientation CD which takes the students through the way we want to do things, how to manage the web site and Moodle. It also, it gives them everything, it covers all aspects like student support, it introduces them to different people.]

10. Do you use discussion forums for introductions or icebreakers at the beginning of your online course?

[Yes, we have a news forum and a discussion forum right at the beginning of the course that we go in and say welcome to the students and you know.]

How successful are these?

[Not a lot do because I think they get most of it off the CD.]

11. Do you moderate any of your discussion forums?

Before a posting is released to students?

[No.]

After a posting is released to students?
For what reasons?

[ I think it’s because it’s to do with the way our course, it’s the writing course and if you’re stepping in there moderating people aren’t learning, so it’s better to discuss something out in the open rather than moderate anything before it’s seen.]

12. Do you encourage reflective practices in discussion forums? That is, ask students to post submissions that reflect on their own and other students work.

[Yes. That’s how we work.]

So it is a requirement?

[It is a requirement.]

13. Do you assess student participation in any of your online courses?

[Yes, our students are required to do 75% participation in the course before their assignments can be accepted for assessment.]

How many?

[All.]

Why?

[Because, you know, we found out that some students just sort of skipped through without actually doing the exercises, without participating. There’s no way we can say ‘hey you have to do this’. They are in their own homes doing there own thing. By having that requirement they realise that they have to participate. Because it’s that participation and the reflective practice that makes them learn.]

Probably not quite the answer to the question.

[OK, what are you wanting?]?

What you are doing there is you’re making student participation a requirement before you are willing to assess but you’re not actually putting marks on the participation?

[I see. We do actually in a way because when we do assessment we look at their critiques. In some of the papers we have a mark for participation. So yes we do in some papers, no we don’t in others.]
14. Do you assess student contributions in any of your online courses? As opposed to participation. By participation we mean that they’ve contributed, say, in replies to other peoples’ posts.

[Yeah, that’s the part of the participation that we are talking about.]

So that is assessable, sometimes.

[Yes.]

How many?

[All of the courses.]

Why? I think you’ve answered this already.

Is authenticity of student work an issue?

[No, because they’re creating, working on their own compositions so they’re not using someone else’s thing.]

And you’re fairly convinced that you are able to recognise that student’s work all of the time?

[Yeah.]

15. What do you consider the barriers that may impede student participation in discussion forums?

[Computer illiteracy.]

Do any of your students have physical access problems to the Internet?

[Yes, that student xxxxx has just pulled out, that one we have been trying to help, we got her sorted and she’s posting stuff but she’s pulled out. She was posting stuff but still doing something wrong but I haven’t quite been able to sort out. I thinks it’s her computer, it’s possible she may even have a virus. So yeah, it is a barrier, people that aren’t familiar with computers it does take them a wee bit to get over it.]

Do you have any control over these barriers?

[I would say yes in a way that we can talk them through and give advice and help, but other than that, no. What they have for software is nothing to do with us.]

What about, do you have in pre-requisites or requirements that they have to have certain hardware and stuff…
[Yeah, well we suggest that in our student handbook and things they’re given, what they should have, whether any of them bother to read it I don’t know. Because they enrol in the course before they get the handbooks don’t they?]

16. What do you consider to be the barriers that may impede student learning in discussion forums?

[Vulnerability, also I think lack of confidence, that’s quite different from vulnerability.]

17. Do you as a tutor have any particular strategies when using discussion forums, particularly when trying to encourage participation, worthwhile contribution and critical reflection?

[Well, if they’re not performing, if they’re not putting enough depth into what they are doing I actually ask some questions that they have to respond to, so if they don’t sort of volunteer the information you drag it out of them more by asking questions or saying I want you to think about this ‘how could you redo it a different way’.]

103
Interview 2

1. How many years have you been using online tools in the course of your teaching?

[Six.]

2. When did you first start using discussion forums in online teaching?

[2001, so right at the beginning.]

3. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way you teach? (not important, equal with every thing else, very important).

[In the way I teach? Be very important, there quite basic, in terms of the techniques we use.]

4. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way students learn? (not important, equal with every thing else, very important).

[For my students it’s very important because that’s where they put there ideas down and give and receive feedback with each other and with me.]

5. What percentage of your teaching is Online? Blended? Face to face?

[It’s about 95, 96% online, we only meet them face to face at orientation and the one week residential that we do each October and not for all students. So for some students it’s 100%.]

6. What levels are the courses you teach online? (Undergraduate diploma or certificate, undergraduate degree, post-graduate).

[Level 5, 6 and 7, undergraduate diplomas.]

7. Are the students in the online courses you teach predominantly EFL, if not, what percentage would not be EFL?

[It varies actually, I mean, last year I had probably 3 or 4 people who were not EFL, this year, I’ve only 2 or 3 at any given time, so what’s that as a percentage? 3 or 4, maybe 5%?]

8. What is the prime role of discussion forums in your courses?
It’s the medium of learning and teaching exchange, the lessons or exercises are posted up as a discussion forum, they respond by putting up their work as an attachment and then their discussion goes on in the forum.]

9. Do you run any face-to-face sessions teaching students how to use the learning management system and how to use a discussion forum?

[Well, we do, but they can’t all get to them because there are students all over the place. We do run orientation at which we take those who turn up into the system and demonstrate it. So what we’ve done instead, so yes we run face to face sessions and we run them as a literal hands on, sit with them, take them in and you know, get them started. But what we’ve done for all the others, for the kind of 90% who don’t get to orientation we’ve create a CD that they can put in and which takes them through (as well as a hand book) that takes them through on a step by step way of doing it.]

10. Do you use discussion forums for introductions or icebreakers at the beginning of your online course?

[Yes, we do. We have several common forums, one is called the common room which is where we suggest they all go first and that becomes a bit like a common room where you introduce yourself and people talk to each other and set up meetings or chats or whatever, and, I think the common room, well it’s the major discussion forum that we use for that and it’s very successful. It’s a place where we put up notices and where they can go at any time and ask about things or just have personal chats with each other.]

You’ve made a comment in there that you think these are quite successful, do you also think they are quite essential?

[Yes, we found that the common room, the first time we began the course we didn’t have such a thing but we only had half a dozen students and they were all doing the same thing. It was the second cohort of students who said that they would like to have a place where they could all meet, and where they could discuss anything and everything and so it was actually as a result of a student suggestion that we set up the comment room and they are very successful. They students really like them.]

11. Do you moderate any of your discussion forums?

[Do you mean in terms of deleting or excising or anything?]
Yes in terms of...

We’ve never had to actually, occasionally I’ve deleted something because students have said “Look I’ve put that to, that was the wrong version, can you take it out because I’m putting the right version up”. And sometimes they put things in, you know, not in quite the right place and so I might move it to where it ought to be, if I can. But apart from that we have had no need to moderate.

12. Do you encourage reflective practices in discussion forums? That is, ask students to post submissions that reflect on their own and other students work.

Well that’s exactly how we work, that is what they are, reflective. I teach creative writing, so reflective practice is what it’s all about.

13. Do you assess student participation in any of your online courses?

Yes actually. Not to begin with because, you know, some of them are a bit shy about, sort of, saying very much about other peoples work and so on, but there are some of the papers as they go further on where I say this is a requirement and it’ll often be put up as an exercise, now look at what the others have done and comment along these lines.

How many?

How many, I don’t know how many, probably, well the further up they get the more that they are required to do that.

Why?

Because for writers being able to, (they learn to critique already published work), but learning to critique each others work gives them the tools to critique their own, and so that’s why. And also because it shouldn’t only be my perspective that they get on their work, by the time they’ve done two or three papers they’re perfectly capable of making that critical feedback. So, I require it for some papers.

14. Do you assess student contributions in any of your online courses?

Yes, in the ones where it’s written in as part of their assessment we do.

Is authenticity of student work an issue?

No, it’s never been an issue. I’m aware that, you know, plagiarism could be a problem. Because it’s not the sort of subject where you’ve got to know facts, if you see
what I mean, it’s the kind of subject where working on your own way of expressing things is the point. Then everything is a work in progress, so if it isn’t their own, like they’ve taken something off the Internet they going to have to work on it anyway, they not getting marked on what they know but on how they do things, and that’s an ongoing formative assessment rather than a summative one.

15. What do you consider the barriers that may impede student participation in discussion forums?

[Well to begin with some of them have not got as lot of self confidence about their, you know, they might not have done very well at school so they don’t think they’ve got very much to offer, so they’re shy, or they’re a little unconfident about their ability to express themselves well or they worry that we might look at their punctuation or something. So, that’s initially but once they get over it and.. Otherwise it would be purely technological, it would be the computers broken down, that would be the main, that would be the only barrier. Or the Internet.]

Do you have any control over these barriers?

[I’m not sure that the word is control, I don’t have any control over what happens to their computers or the Internet.]

No, so certainly in terms of that impediment you have no control?

[No, none at all, but in terms of the shyness, and sort of self effacement, that, I just do lots of encouraging and that passes. By the time they’re on their second paper or third paper or something they’ve forgotten they ever felt like that.]

16. What do you consider to be the barriers that may impede student learning in discussion forums?

[Do you mean that some might prefer it to be face to face or something? A couple of them commented, well some of the ones who have just started that they sort of, that they’d really rather be in a classroom, that they liked to be able to see people or hear their voices. I don’t think that that exactly impedes them, but something they are beginning to be conscious of, that there they are sitting at home in front of the screen, that it seems impersonal.]

So really, it’s coming down to personal learning styles
[And also what they’re used to, because you also get the comments further down the track that they thought it would be more impersonal than it is and that once they sort of engage in it most of them actually quite enjoy it. We lose very few from that sort of, “I don’t like being in a non-real classroom” Very few, that’s quite rare once they get used to it.]

OK, on that theme would you consider the discussion forums a facilitator in terms of keeping on board?

[Yes.]

And engaging them as you said.

[Well, as I said, they’re the main tool we use, I mean, they can ring me, they ring through the 0800 number and talk to me on the cell phone, and they can send me emails. I discourage that unless it’s something that really has to be private, they do instant messaging and so forth, but in terms of the real engagement with each and with tutor, that’s where they do it, in the forums.]

17. Do you as a tutor have any particular strategies when using discussion forums, particularly when trying to encourage participation, worthwhile contribution and critical reflection?

[Yeah, I do, I’m not sure how easy it is to describe them. I guess if you wanted a quick formula, what I could say is that I respond to, I try to respond to every student posting, not the sort of posting that says “Oh yeah, I see”, but they’ve putting up a response to an exercise or to a considered response to some other student’s exercise I will always come in and make a comment, so that’s part of, I’m sort of modelling that you acknowledge, and then the first thing I say is, the first thing I put up is always a positive statement “I really like what you said about such and such” or “This is a very interesting way of looking at such and such” or whatever. Because it’s a writing course what you are doing is trying to raise the bar all the time on what they’re doing. Having said “Excellent thoughtful response and I like this, this and this” then I will have, often I will have either questions or suggestions so I’m kind of modelling how I would like them to do it, you can always find something positive to say about whatever someone’s put up. To be useful, it’s no use just saying “Oh wow, I like that”, to be useful you’ve got to begin to raise the things that could be improved on or gone over again and so quite often I’ll put it in the form of question and then I’ll say]
“If you want some suggestions, these are the ones I’d start with”. So I don’t try to do everything all at once but just give them the idea of, positive, query about things that perhaps aren’t working or could be better, suggestions about things you can actually see they might need to work on particularly and if there are sort of bits and pieces like a really glaring error in terms of say grammar or syntax or something I might just say “Oh, couple of other bits and pieces” and just put a correction there. I usually don’t do that with the beginners because I think that its really daunting but with my level 7 class who are all writing novels and writing 500 sort of word comments on each others work every day I will do that because they can take it and it’s what they need.]
Interview 3

1. How many years have you been using online tools in the course of your teaching?

[We’ve been developing the online tools for about two years. So, particularly xxxxxx and I have been the ones for the nursing programme that design the modules. We took the content from the different teachers, nursing lecturers that took that class and then we put it into an online usable version, but we just, since February have actually had full time students.]

So you are actually developing stuff for other tutors to teach?

[Yes.]

2. When did you first start using discussion forums in online teaching?

[The online bio 1 module that we do now is the only one that has discussion forums in it, well I guess nursing practice does too, but xxxxxx designed that one, so since February we’ve been using it for students.]

3. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way you teach?

[I think they can be important, it didn’t work out (as I’ll get down to in some of the other questions), it didn’t work out very well for bio because the students went off on their own and discussed offline and so they saw the discussion online as being a waste of time, because then they had to go and type stuff. And they preferred to either meet, as a group, they developed study groups on their own, or talk on the phone. And then they would all get together and agree on an answer and tell me what it was. I can see how it could be useful, but it didn’t work out in this class.]

So they essentially circumvented it?

[They did.]

4. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way students learn?

[I think it’s essential in the way they learn, whether they do it online or not. What we’ve seen with the nursing program is students that get into a study group where they discuss, informally, face to face or however, the topic that they are working on,
these are the ones that succeed and the solo students that don’t do that, that back and forth discussing generally don’t do as well. So in some version I think they are essential.

5. What percentage of your teaching is? Online? Blended? Face to face?

[Mine is totally online.]

6. What levels are the courses you teach online? (Undergraduate diploma or certificate, undergraduate degree, post-graduate)

[Unit One, the very beginning nursing course is what we’re working on.]

So, that would be level 5?

[Yes.]

First year of a degree?

[Yes, the Bachelor of Nursing.]

7. Are the students in the online courses you teach predominantly EFL, if not, what percentage would not be EFL?

[Out of 15 I have 1, xxxxxxx is from India, everybody else is from New Zealand.]

8. What is the prime role of discussion forums in your courses?

[We wanted the students to, rather than just delivering them content, we wanted them to work out the answers together, rather ‘here’s the line of the correct answer, memorise that. It’s just that that doesn’t provide enough meaning to them, but if they have to (you just put out the question) and then they have talk about it, work around it until they finally get to that one that’s the correct answer. They learn so much more along the way.]

9. Do you run any face-to-face sessions teaching students how to use the learning management system and how to use a discussion forum?

Absolutely. And we didn’t enough of that. What we did this February when we started this particular group of students, this fifteen, was, we had a two day orientation day on campus and we spent a full day in a computer lab teaching them how to run the whole NorthNet, Moodle thing but a lot of it was practice with discussion forums, and we still had problems, so I think we would increase that practice time next time.]
Would you say therefore that those students that carry on in NorthNet in the second year would have a greater advantage in that area? And knowing that they already know how to use Moodle?

[Yes. Because they get so distracted by “which button to I push?” and “how do I back up?” that it detracts from what they’re learning, so the more familiar they are which NorthNet I see them just taking off and doing better and better as they go because then it won’t be such a puzzle.]

10. Do you use discussion forums for introductions or icebreakers at the beginning of your online course?

[We did just a little practice one but I think we would do more, where you introduce yourself and somebody comments on what you said and that sort of thing. I we are going to do that a little bit more extensively]

How successful are these?

[I’d say it was partly successful, yes I think if they had, were truly distance students that weren’t in a clump in Kaitaia, like 3 in Kaitaia, 4 in various other towns were they weren’t physically close to each other it would have worked better. Because then they couldn’t have met face to face and they would have had to do it.]

That’s interesting, that the preference is still for face to face.

[Yes, well it’s quicker.]

11. Do you moderate any of your discussion forums?

[The moderating that I did was, when they get to the end and have decided on an answer to the question, then I can whether it’s right or wrong. I don’t, in the middle, say “you’re going the right direction” or “you’re not”, that sort of thing. I wait till they get to the end and then they produce the answer and then I tell them whether that’s the correct one. One thing that I know you would have to moderate is if you had a group that weren’t nice to each other but this group knows each other and they’re all friends, so there’s no inappropriate flaming or anything. They’re good to each other. I would have to moderate for that but I don’t have to.]

12. Do you encourage reflective practices in discussion forums? That is, ask students to post submissions that reflect on their own and other students work.
[No, I don’t have them grade postings, there’s a thing in Moodle where you can rate postings, I didn’t have them do that. I thought at this level just getting them to post something was my objective, I think later on if everyone is just doing surface stuff, trite, “Oh, I agree with you” and that’s all you’d have to start rating them, so I can see a place for it, but at this point they are awfully shy at writing and if somebody rated them low and said that “what you wrote was just stupid” they are not going to write again. I think there is a place for it later.]

13. Do you assess student participation in any of your online courses?
[No, I hadn’t]

14. Do you assess student contributions in any of your online courses?
[Not in Bio 1, I think in other ones we are going to. One we are going to do next semester, in ANZ Society, it’s 10% of the grade, is that they participate in the discussion forums, so we do have that planned, but we didn’t do it for bio.]

What about in terms of their contribution, when they actually make the contributions do you actually assess that and give it a mark?
[No, not at this level. I think there is a place for that later, absolutely. What we tend to do is we make it an assignment if we are going to mark it and we use that instead of the discussion forum. I know that in the communication class this semester with this group of students xxxxxx had them post little paragraphs on whatever the topic of the week was, that she did mark but she did it in the assignment feature instead of the discussion forum.]

15. What do you consider the barriers that may impede student participation in discussion forums?
[Well, with my group the ability to do face to face discussion won out, I think that distracted them from wanting to do it online, so much easier to pick up the phone since they’re not long distance from each other or meet at a student’s house and do the discussion, that they’re going to choose the easiest route, but if they were truly separate distance students, again I think that it would have worked because they would not have had an alternative.]

Do you have any control over these barriers?
[No, not really. We could have made a fuss and said “No, no, you have to discuss online” but because they were meeting the objective of doing the discussion and coming up with good answers we felt like “why argue with success” since the act of discussing online was not our objective, it was the learning that comes from that which they were getting in a slightly different way.]

16. What do you consider to be the barriers that may impede student learning in discussion forums?

[I think shyness is one, they’re afraid to, even if they have a good idea they’re afraid some of them to type it, “would I look silly?” that sort of thing. Especially if someone’s typed one in really good, because we have a few really stellar students in there they’re going to write really complex things and everybody else feels dumb. I think that would be a thing that would prevent them. Some of them don’t spell very well or read fast, and while they’re very articulate with verbal they’re not good with written communication and that’s an impediment as well.]

That’s an interesting comment.

[I wonder how much of that with the focus of (were about 50% Maori students in our group of 15) and I wonder if that culture of verbal history, oral history and I think of the hui where they chew through a topic until they all come to consensus, that sort of thing, that they have more of an oral tradition than the rest of us from other backgrounds. I don’t know, I don’t know enough about it being completely non-Kiwi. But they really contribute, when we do our face to face days down here they contribute, they say great stuff in discussions that we have together, so I know that they can communicate well, verbally. I’ve seen it.]

That’s interesting that a cultural influence could possibly be a barrier.

[You just wonder.]

You do.

17. Do you as a tutor have any particular strategies when using discussion forums, particularly when trying to encourage participation, worthwhile contribution and critical reflection?

[I try and, well we’ve posted them questions, so we had specific questions that were related to the topic and we tried to use questions that we were going to use on the]
exam, that we’re being efficient with their learning, you know, that they are not learning a whole bunch of stuff over here but I’m going to test with this over here. That sort of thing. We pick relevant to topic, relevant to the exam and that’s the main strategies. And then self learning, here’s the question, you find the answer.}
Interview 4

1. How many years have you been using online tools in the course of your teaching?

[Online, particularly. I’ve been using web sites probably for about, goes back about at least 10 years.]

What about software such as Moodle etc?

[Well, Moodle, I’ve been using it for as long as it’s been in the Polytechnic, how long is that?]

About 3 years.

2. When did you first start using discussion forums in online teaching?

[Probably about 2 years ago.]

3. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way you teach? (not important, equal with every thing else, very important)

[Probably the most important.]

4. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way students learn? (not important, equal with every thing else, very important)

[Very important.]

5. What percentage of your teaching is? Online? Blended? Face to face?

[It ranges from maybe 30-70% blended. Most of it’s blended now.]

6. What levels are the courses you teach online? (Undergraduate diploma or certificate, undergraduate degree, post-graduate)

[Levels 5, 6 and 7.]

7. Are the students in the online courses you teach predominantly EFL, if not, what percentage would not be EFL?

[Probably between 5 and 30%.]

That’s quite high isn’t it?

[Yes.]

8. What is the prime role of discussion forums in your courses?
[Two, well two prime roles. One is to build a sense of online community and the other one is as an assessment tool. And the third prime role is as a means applying knowledge, rather than just learning for retention! And a fourth! The other really important thing is to encourage students to read before class.]

9. Do you run any face-to-face sessions teaching students how to use the learning management system and how to use a discussion forum?

[No, as little as possible.]

As little as possible? Why is that?

[Because it’s pretty easy you know, for most of them. Some of them have anxiety around it, but the anxiety is probably more (I’ve had one student that’s had technical difficulties and another student was not happy to put her thinking up in front of others).]

A common issue I believe?

[And on the other hand I’ve struck a lot of students who have been really enthusiastic about.. they’ve sort of found their voice in forums.]

10. Do you use discussion forums for introductions or icebreakers at the beginning of your online course?

[No, not really.]

11. Do you moderate any of your discussion forums?

[No]

For what reason?

[Well, I don’t see a need to.]

12. Do you encourage reflective practices in discussion forums? That is, ask students to post submissions that reflect on their own and other students work.

[Definitely, that’s sort of the whole point of it. I’m really fortunate in the topics that I teach because they encourage reflection. Well hang on, it’s quite conceptual so the information means nothing until people are able to sort of process it and do stuff with it.]

So the courses you teach lend themselves to reflection?
[Yes, for example leadership. I've really got some gems from discussion and of course, one of the things I've done is to sort of artificially stimulate conversation is of course the students are assessed so they pretty well have to go there. And the other part of it is I retain/hold back a few marks for a second posting, and even if it's really brief that’s rewarded.]

13. Do you assess student participation in any of your online courses?
[Yes, I use Moodle’s facility to apply a mark directly to postings.]

14. Do you assess student contributions in any of your online courses?
[Yes, there’s marks for content and there’s marks for application, so those are the major marks.]

Is authenticity of student work an issue?
[Doesn’t seem to be, I mean you know your students when, you see, their ‘voice’ becomes quite apparent, especially in forums. Is that a common finding?]

I think in our position here in NorthTec with our small classes we can do that, I could find when I interview tutors that are teaching a hundred students online they may not get to know their students well enough and then it may become issue where they just have somebody else sit down in an evening and do their work for them.

15. What do you consider the barriers that may impede student participation in discussion forums?
[Not having them as assessments. Students don’t do things that are not assessed! I’ve pretty well got over that. Another barrier is in the NZ Diploma of Business they are very prescriptive about what and how you assess. The degree programmes give us a little more flexibility in, to look at deeper learning]

Do you have any control over these barriers? In the degree papers you certainly do.
[Yes, you’ve got more flexibility. But, the leadership paper is a diploma paper and that’s been really successful (but it hasn’t gone through external moderation yet).]

16. What do you consider to be the barriers that may impede student learning in discussion forums?
[Impede student learning? I think possibly any students that are shy or who are not confident, that’s probably the biggest barrier. They normally get over that. In fact,
one of the real advantages is that students that are not so confident about what the task requires are able to stand back and look at the contribution of others. Of course, once they then make their contribution they have to be, not necessarily unique but they have to be, have to add value to the discourse.

So how do you, or do you have a position that you take on lurkers in a discussion forum, those that just sit back and watch and don’t participate much.

[Well, they don’t get any marks.]

Fair enough!

17. Do you as a tutor have any particular strategies when using discussion forums, particularly when trying to encourage participation, worthwhile contribution and critical reflection?

[Yes, I just try and put a little bit of feedback in myself and I using then quite… well one of my motivations is to reduce the amount of marking I do. Although a set of 8 forums actually replaces one assessment, so on the surface of it there is more marking, but I tell the students that I am not going to direct feedback, I am only going to give them a mark, and they actually learn from looking at each others work and I will highlight answers that I think are particularly good, so you know, my strategy is to give praise to the best work and if there’s anything that, any problems that I need to address, for example, a referencing issue or something like that I can address those generally or just send a message privately to the student.]
Interview 5

1. How many years have you been using online tools in the course of your teaching?
   
   [I’m trying to remember how many, I’m not entirely sure, would have been about, maybe definitely 4, possibly 5.]

2. When did you first start using discussion forums in online teaching?
   
   [They’re are always part of online teaching.]

3. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way you teach? (not important, equal with everything else, very important)
   
   [I see them as being very important.]

4. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way students learn? (not important, equal with everything else, very important)
   
   [I think that’s various, I’d say, it’s hard to tell, I suppose as equal to everything else. Like for some students it’s quite important but other students seem not to use them so obviously it’s not important.]

5. What percentage of your teaching is Online? Blended? Face to face?
   
   [It’s all online.]

6. What levels are the courses you teach online? (Undergraduate diploma or certificate, undergraduate degree, post-graduate)
   
   [Postgraduate.]

7. Are the students in the online courses you teach predominantly EFL, if not, what percentage would not be EFL?
   
   [There would be some English second language, on average the majority would be English first language, but especially at post-grads you get a smattering from overseas.]

   If you were to put it into a percentage what would it be?
   
   [This year I’ve got 2 out of about 20.]

   So it’s quite likely that you would have 1 or 2 out of every 20 each year?
8. What is the prime role of discussion forums in your courses?

[I use it to re-enforce reading, to look for understanding. It varies really, because I’m teaching postgraduate students and because they are experienced in their practice, what I teach is fairly practically orientated then I’m looking for them to be reflective, think about their practice. So I do a mixture of ‘read this and tell me what you think about this question related to it’, ‘OK, give me an example of this particular thing from your practice.’]

9. Do you run any face-to-face sessions teaching students how to use the learning management system and how to use a discussion forum?

[No, never.]

10. Do you use discussion forums for introductions or icebreakers at the beginning of your online course?

[Yes, in fact I was just looking back, I’ve just finished teaching just now and the one that absolutely all students responded to was the introduction. So it was basically an opportunity to ‘introduce yourself, tell us who you are, what your passions are about whatever’ you know, that sort of thing. They seem to respond quite well. The introduction stuff is quite good.]

So those are quite successful?

[They are actually.]

11. Do you moderate any of your discussion forums?

[No, I don’t. When you say moderate you mean?]

Some tutors feel the need that they have to view and accept a posting by a student before other students can see it.

[No, nothing like that at all.]

12. Do you encourage reflective practices in discussion forums? That is, ask students to post submissions that reflect on their own and other students work.

[Yes, I do that all the time, my topic’s quite reflective anyway, it’s about clinical reasoning so it is quite reflective, it’s about how they think in practice.]
So you ask them to reflect on their own work, and what about other students’ work?

[I do a bit of both, it’s most successful, I think, when they reflect on their own work and their work being their practice. Set up tasks for them to evaluate other peoples contribution to something or other, and it doesn’t always work that well to be honest. So that’s a more academic thing. I ask them to send around their models of the way they think in practice or something like that and to give back some comments to the students that they were responsible for, like there will be small groups and post them up on Blackboard.]

13. Do you assess student participation (and by participation I mean simply activity and not as in the quality of their contribution) in any of your online courses?

[No, I don’t. But it’s an interesting point because this year I (as part of the same course) I had a connection with Canadian students and we did a four week thing where we ran sort of together and on that the Canadian students were bouncing all sorts of things on the discussion forum. It was really good. And that was, it turned out, they were offered 10% as a contribution. I was amazed; stunned that it was so important.]

One of my other interviewees made a comment (and in line with a lot of other tertiary education) that unless you assess it they don’t do it.

[Yes, I don’t think that’s entirely true, and they were under-graduates I have to say, well they were Mastery entry students, they had a first degree, but academically speaking they were at least a the level my students would be on. Probably they didn’t have the practical experience. But it certainly made a difference to that group. My group were quite keen to do the online and do the talk to one another stuff but not everybody is.]

14. Do you assess student contributions (in other words, assess the quality of their work) in any of your online courses?

[Not in the discussion forums.]

Do you do this elsewhere? Ask them to submit work posted up to Blackboard?

[No, well only assignments.]
Okay, within assignments that are put up into Blackboard, do you have any problem with authenticity of your student work?  
[No.]  

Or do you use other mechanisms to guarantee that?  
[The assignments are handed in separate to Blackboard. They are always authentic, you can tell.]  

15. What do you consider the barriers that may impede student participation in discussion forums?  
[I think technology is the big one. We use Blackboard here and Blackboard is not a good discussion forum. I don’t know if anything’s any better to be honest. But last year like we are onto Blackboard 7, I don’t know what number we are at, we updated this year and last year it was, the forums were better last year. This year it seems clumsier to move around. It’s moving around all the threads in the forums. It would seem better to have something more like a Google document or something like that where you can actually, or a blog or something where you can actually put your comments in.]  

Or something like a Wiki?  
[Or a Wiki maybe, just something that allows you to, you know, question things as they get put in, change things, see the whole thing together.]  

Do you have any control over these barriers?  
[No, it’s the technology.]  

16. What do you consider to be the barriers that may impede student learning in discussion forums?  
[I suppose it’s the same sort of thing in a sense, because if they don’t take the time to do it, or they get fed up because it’s a slow and laborious process. What happens typically is that they’re not discussions, they are like, somebody makes a statement and the next person makes another statement. Especially if I asked them to comment on something, obviously what they’ve done is they’ve done their homework on it and they just feed in what they’ve come up with, without reading anything else I suspect often. So they are like very isolated bits of information, and what I would like them to do is to actually comment on one another’s and ask questions of one another. They]
don’t do that. I do it. So I’m not sure what will make them do it, motivation perhaps or that they feel that they are confident enough. It’s the usual student thing really.]

17. Do you as a tutor have any particular strategies when using discussion forums, particularly when trying to encourage participation, worthwhile contribution and critical reflection?

[Well, I do, but I wouldn’t guarantee that they work all the time. I was just looking at the discussion I’ve been using in terms of which ones people most frequently respond to, and one of the ones that brought up most responses was just a comment about, it was an article they had to read and I had little quotes on it and I said comment on that and because it was a different way of viewing things that was familiar to them they had lots to say about it. So that was quite good. And when they get to talk about their own practice often that’s quite good. They like to do that. When I tried debate from various occasions or I set them up, I set up the debate, ‘this group, you go to the cons’, it was interesting. I’ve had various responses to that. I’ve had one year where people would rush into it, and doing that thing about ‘right you lot, this is our argument against it’ and stuff like that. This year they didn’t really get into it. I think about only one side of the debate did it. I know what I tried to do, I tried to get them to do that on a Google page and I had the link for the Google page in it, but it didn’t seem to work particularly well I’d have to say. A lot of them couldn’t access it, so it was a technology problem. They probably just got fed up because they had to go somewhere else other than the discussion forum. So that was the debates. I try and put in fairly controversial questions so there are things that are not straight forward. They can work quite well, it worked quite well in that thing where I said we had the Canadian students on board, I had quite controversial sorts of issues, cases where they had to comment on things and then I added in another dimension in the case, in this situation ‘now this guy is Maori, what else do you think?’, those sorts of things and that worked really well, but as I say those Canadian students were really rewarded for participating so who knows. But my group participated quite well too. The more discussion you get going the more other people seem to add in.]

Yes, it can snowball. There seems to be a critical mass there doesn’t there?

[Yeah, one of the things I learnt was that, it was the Canadian thing because we’d done it before, when you get quite a few students they kind of get there group and our
group, is we had originally divided them up into four groups on Blackboard and gave them tasks and things to do, that didn’t work well, when we put it all up just on the main board, that was better and I think what happened was those that wanted to discuss will discuss and liked the debates and the issues and got on with it, and others learnt from watching it, if they don’t do it. It’s a bit of an issue really, part of it is, if you know your students at all, and some of these students I do know because they’re our graduates from our undergraduate programme, if you know the students it helps. You can direct some parts to them that you know they’ll get on with. That’s really useful sometimes. I know for instance in this, I teach a research paper too, and when I did that one I set up a little research project, so I had them all assigned different tasks to go away and do and to collate stuff and that worked extremely well, and I think it worked well because the person I selected to do quite a bit of the kind of conceptual work on it was a really bright student and somebody else collated all the things and did the tick-box stuff and she liked doing that sort of stuff and did it really well. Part of that was luck and part of it was knowing those students. So I think knowing your students helps but as I say I don’t see them face to face, but I get a feel for some of them because I know them and sometimes a little bit what they do on Blackboard or we have tele-conferences as well, sorry I should have mentioned it somewhere.]
Interview 6

1. How many years have you been using online tools in the course of your teaching?

[2.]

2. When did you first start using discussion forums in online teaching?

[Over both those 2 years, I had another job within the school that didn’t require me to do online teaching and then I moved across to teaching a particular postgraduate course that does use online teaching and so discussion boards were an integral part of that from the beginning.]

3. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way you teach? (not important, equal with every thing else, very important)

[Well, now how do I rate them? Do I rate them as they are or as I think they ought to be? Like I think that they are potentially really important if, in fact, the students would do what they were meant do on them, which I’m sure we will go into later.] Rate them in the way that you would be teaching at the moment.

[Right, how would I rate them, well I guess I would just have to use that same thing, “useful when used”.]

4. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way students learn? (not important, equal with every thing else, very important)

[Well, I think that the discussion forums, if they were discussion forums as distinct from posting locations have in them a really good potential and the people who do shift their game from it being a posting forum to a discussion forum get a lot out of them.] Are you referring to tutors or students?

[No, I’m talking about students.]

5. What percentage of your teaching is Online? Blended? Face to face?

[The particular two courses that I’m referring to that I use online discussion boards that are the focus of this are all distance courses but they are not a full percentage of my workload. I don’t know how to answer your question!]
They’re not a full percentage of your teaching workload?

[Correct, so for example I have some research time within my workload, and my teaching time has, I teach three courses over the year, one in one semester and two in the other semester and two of those three courses are fully distance based.]

Okay

[That will let you work out the answer to your question!]

6. What levels are the courses you teach online? (Undergraduate diploma or certificate, undergraduate degree, post-graduate)

[The ones I do online postgraduate diploma.]

7. Are the students in the online courses you teach predominantly EFL, if not, what percentage would not be EFL?

[Yes, predominantly.]

You may get a small number of internationals?

[Yeah, we do, but small. My class sizes would be between 10 and 15 and I might have one per intake that doesn’t have English as their first language.]

8. What is the prime role of discussion forums in your courses?

[The theoretical prime role of the discussion forums is to give the (you can see where I’m going from here)]

You’ve got a wish list!

[is to give the students an opportunity to get that experience of critiquing peer work and thought, to be able to have discussions, interactions and hear a broader range of views than could possibly just come from the lecturer.]

9. Do you run any face-to-face sessions teaching students how to use the learning management system and how to use a discussion forum?

[I don’t have face to face sessions, I have a telephone conference, but not all of the students have broadband, so some of the students, when they’re on the tele-conference don’t also have the computer in front of them. But I front-end Blackboard with some quite specific guidelines of where they are to go and what they are to do, and, for example, on of their first postings to a discussion forum is to introduce themselves]
and that has quite a specific instruction “You are looking for the green button in the top left hand corner”, “pick this thread which is in pink” you know, that sort of stuff.

10. Do you use discussion forums for introductions or icebreakers at the beginning of your online course?

[Absolutely I do.]

How successful are these?

[Well, they work OK, partially because what I do is I tell the students that their posting to the discussion board will let me know that they are technologically live.]

11. Do you moderate any of your discussion forums? As in, I’m not sure if you can do this in Blackboard but, not let other students see postings until you have reviewed them.

[I don’t know if I can, but the student group is such that I would not, because I am dealing with a professional postgraduate community.]

12. Do you encourage reflective practices in discussion forums? That is, ask students to post submissions that reflect on their own and other students’ work.

[I attempt to.]

So you ask them to put up discussion that reflect both on their own and on other students’ work?

[Correct.]

13. Do you assess student participation (by participation I mean activity as opposed to the quality of their work) in any of your online courses?

[Currently no, although we have been having conversations about how we could do that. At the moment the courses do not have a contribution to the final mark that is associated with posting or participation online.]

14. Do you assess student contributions in any of your online courses?

[No. Their course work is assessed through a separately submitted final assignment, rather than through the content that goes on the postings.]

Is authenticity of student work an issue?

[No.]
15. What do you consider the barriers that may impede student participation in discussion forums?

[OK, I should have made a list, but I will do a rabbit and we will see how far I get. One of them is technology access, that is, not all of my students are using broadband and some people on dial-up will find the process of putting it onto Blackboard quite laborious. Some people do that by typing onto another document first and then just cutting and pasting, but that actually involves a more complex process and not everybody feels confident with that. The majority of my students would be women, and not all of them are necessarily computer savvy. So for example, at the beginning of the course I have to spend quite a bit of time actually helping people, even understand things like where to go and find links and how to use delicious and things like that so they don’t come with a very high level of computer comfortability. And most of them, they are all, can I say this? Yes I can. They are all part time students. So these are people that have varying amounts of other employment that is more important to them than this course. They are doing the course voluntarily, most of them would have only some or partial financial contribution from their employer, so for a lot of people this study is in a way their hobby. What that means is that they are working. If we take an archetypal group of 12, of those 12, 10 would be, no 8 would be in full time employment, 4 would be in part time employment. Of this archetypal 12, 10 would have children, and people would have children and be working full or part-time and be studying. So they have a lot of competition in their life for their priorities, and I’m not sure that contributing to profound philosophical discussions feels like a real priority for them. I think they come in, pick up the materials, I mean we talk about how these are actually very expensive text books of readings, they come, they pick up the text books, they will come usually quite well to the telephone conferences because we have telephone conferences that run fortnightly alongside the support of this and contribute with varying degrees of enthusiasm and alacrity to discussion boards. And that includes, not just for themselves, but they don’t necessarily contribute for each other as well. For example, I have a particular activity where I allocate them to put up some work that somebody else that I’ve individually match whose working in a complementary area will critique and give feedback and then I give feedback to both of them on the feedback and they don’t even always do that for each other. So there is something about life pressures and workloads. There is something about keyboarding...
skills, and there’s something about (our profession tends to be a fairly oral profession) and there’s some hesitation from people about putting what think in writing, it feels harder to withdraw it. If you have a conversation, somebody disagrees with you and critiques your work you can’t go back and re-read it and obsess over it and there’s a safety, it’s somewhere around the parameters of safety, confidence, courage and accountability that makes people nervous about putting up on a Blackboard the sort of things that they would say quite comfortably in a conversation, but writing it down is different.

In a similar theme to that, would you put that in the same sort of boat as the comment that some people can be a little bit nervous about putting their own creative thoughts up deliberately, know that they are going to be critiqued by other people?

[Absolutely. It’s a real threshold for people. It’s like putting a journal article off to a journal, people come back and they tell you they don’t like it.]

And you know full well when you put it up there that it’s got to be watertight.

[Yeah, and yet we ask students to put things up without the level of rigour and preparation that we would do for a journal article. So we ask a lot of people and I think, I haven’t talked about the age of these students, these students would range in age from 22, that is relatively new graduates who are doing this as a first practitioner year postgraduate paper, through to people who would be in their 40’s and 50’s and their expertise and comfortableness of putting themselves out to be critiqued varies.]

16. What do you consider to be the barriers that may impede student learning in discussion forums?

[Not getting around to participating impedes their learning. We craft activities like, just to give you an example, one the learning activities that I have online, this is not a discussion board but this is online, is that there is a quiz, so they are asked to read a journal article, they are asked to complete the quiz which basically tests with what degree of a critical eye they have read the article. And then what they are asked to do on the discussion board is to identify what they didn’t get right, and whether, when they’ve gone back in to look at the journal article they can see why they didn’t get it right or whether they still don’t understand why they didn’t get it right. The intention of that learning activity is they will be helped, a) to learning how to read with a greater level of depth and b) that they will learn that different people also have
difficulty in seeing and critiquing articles. But if not enough people post then it leaves the people who have feeling exposed and like dorks. So that inhibits their learning in two or three different ways.

17. Do you as a tutor have any particular strategies when using discussion forums, particularly when trying to encourage participation, worthwhile contribution and critical reflection?

[What I try to do is that I try to go in regularly, acknowledge that somebody has posted and affirm and value that. Comment on what somebody else has said or what people have said that I agree with and use that as a springboard by asking another follow up question. So I might say “Joanne makes a good point about such and such which is actually different from what Susan you said in your posting. Do you think that these are incompatible or do you think that they be reconciled in some way”. So I put in another question. That’s an active technique that I use.]
Interview 7

1. How many years have you been using online tools in the course of your teaching?

[Probably up to 7, but I need to let you know too that I am not actively teaching at the moment, I’m training staff.]

That’s OK, so long as you’ve been there, done that, that’s fine.

2. When did you first start using discussion forums in online teaching?

[It might have been 1999.]

3. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way you teach? (not important, equal with every thing else, very important)

[Obviously very important. A lot of course depends on how they are actually used. I mean if, if they are an optional extra it usually reflects that it’s not a primary component of the course itself. So a lot really depends on the sort of outcome I’m after.]

4. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way students learn? (not important, equal with every thing else, very important)

[In terms of your interview question sheet I would say very important, but of course that’s on the premise that it is actually an important part of the course itself. It’s never done just for the sake of it, it’s usually because there is some sort of reflective output that is required.]

5. What percentage of your teaching is Online? Blended? Face to face?

[Back in 1999 it was blended but primarily face to face, these days though it is entirely online, the tutor training that we do here at Bible College.]

6. What levels are the courses you teach online? (Undergraduate diploma or certificate, undergraduate degree, post-graduate)

[When I was at UCOL, the polytechnic where I first taught online with, it was all undergraduate diploma, these days it is undergraduate degree and postgraduate diploma.]
7. Are the students in the online courses you teach predominantly EFL, if not, what percentage would not be EFL?

[Yes, they are.]

8. What is the prime role of discussion forums in your courses?

[Well, in the centre of distance learning we offer courses on CD-ROM, so we send out materials to students. Without the online discussions students would have no way of interacting with one another, nor with their online tutor. So basically they are stuck with the course materials we send them so that the prime role is to actually give students a bit of a voice for one another and also with their tutor so that they can explore particular ideas, share experiences and perspectives and also more critically engage with elements of the course materials themselves.]

9. Do you run any face-to-face sessions teaching students how to use the learning management system and how to use a discussion forum?

[No, not at all. We usually just send them PDF document instructions with screenshots, step by step. Once they’ve done one or two they’ve actually mastered it. It’s very simple technology now.]

10. Do you use discussion forums for introductions or icebreakers at the beginning of your online course?

[Yes, usually we just get students to introduce themselves, so nothing special like ‘describe the stuff between your toes’ or anything like that. It’s just straight ‘who you are’. Perhaps which church you go to, that type of thing.]

Are these successful?

[Yes they are, invariably.]

11. Do you moderate any of your discussion forums?

[Yes, we do.]

In what way?

[Solely on the comments students make. We make sure that our tutors do actually engage with their students once they have posted. So it’s not just a helter-skelter – by moderate do you mean we pre-check messages before they are left?]
Yes.

[No we don’t.]

But you are fully aware of what is being posted most of the time?

[Yes, we use Moodle which sends out automated emails half an hour after the message is posted.]

12. Do you encourage reflective practices in discussion forums? That is, ask students to post submissions that reflect on their own and other students work.

[Yes, from time to time.]

Do you ask students to reflect on their own and on other students’ work? Or just on their own?

[Very seldom. Usually on their own.]

13. Do you assess student participation (and by participation I simply mean ‘level of activity’) in any of your online courses?

[Yes, we do.]

How many?

[Usually we go for one or two messages per theme or per lesson and there is usually 10-12 lessons in a course. We expect a reasonable level of student engagement there.] Why do you do this?

[Largely because we want students to reflect on the actual implementation of the different things we are teaching them, plus we want them to be able to reflect a bit more critically about who they are and where they are at. So it is usually there to, I guess, amplify the real life application of what they are learning.]

14. Do you assess student contributions in any of your online courses? That is, the quality of what they write.

[Yes.]

How many?

[In Moodle we can list all students posts quite conveniently so we tend to take all of them into account quite quickly.] Why?
Because we think that it is important that students just don’t put words, but quality words online, the sorts of words facilitate further conversation, the sort of words that show that they have reflected seriously.

Is authenticity of student work an issue? That is, are you ever concerned that what you are seeing is actually is that student’s posting?

[No, never. It’s never been an issue. After awhile you actually get to know your students, so if a student did suddenly post some wonderfully gee-wizzy stuff that was out of character you’d sort of get a bit of a feel for it. And this is across courses as well.]

Just on that theme then, what would be the typical size of an online class for you?

[Around about 8-10.]

Yes, because obviously you probably wouldn’t know them if there were 100-200.

[Yes, that’s right. But if there were 200 or so we would actually break the class up into smaller groups.]

15. What do you consider the barriers that may impede student participation in discussion forums?

[I think one of them would be a poor discussion topic itself, something that hasn’t been well thought through. Perhaps a discussion topic which students just can’t hook into somehow.]

[Another would be the amount of time that some of these things take. Quite often discussions ask for some meaty involvement which students can’t spare time for.]

[Another thing we found that impedes student participation is a lack of tutor interest. So if our tutors aren’t actually in there engaging students tend not to follow up on their own messages.]

Do you have any control over these barriers?

[Yes, every single one of them.]

16. What do you consider to be the barriers that may impede student learning in discussion forums?
[I think if the discussion forums aren’t the core part of the course, if they are not properly integrated into the learning materials then students will tend not to engage with them and just ignore them. So if they are an optional extra, our experience anyway is that students just tend not to be involved at all.]

[Another barrier could be just the timing of it all. I’m running a tutor training session at the moment and I’ve got four very active students in there and they are sending many, many messages in the online discussion forums. Other students are yet to engage, to make a start, and I know that they’ve got probably 20-30 messages in their inbox from this course so far. That’s bound to be fairly overwhelming for them, so possible the amount of traffic that can be generated can impede student learning.]

17. Do you as a tutor have any particular strategies when using discussion forums, particularly when trying to encourage participation, worthwhile contribution and critical reflection?

[Yes. One thing I have tried recently, this has actually helped me to manage my own time as well, has been to establish a very good online presence very early on in the course, so being there in the thick of it and responding to messages very quickly and quite thoroughly. But then in later weeks preparing a once a week summary, and in that summary I’ll take probably 2-3 hours to weave together the various discussion threads that have been taking place, I’ll link to individual’s messages, I’ll mention some students by name, summarise the main points that have been made and also to take quotes out of some key messages that students make. And on doing that I actually bring the discussion to a nice close, I’m also able to add my own value to the sorts of things that have been discussed, suggest further readings, further ideas and I’m also able to show students that I have actually read through every message very carefully and reflected on what they have been saying. So I found that modelling to be quite worthwhile and of course students, as soon as they read themselves being quoted see the value that I am adding. I think it does provide them with a bit more motivation to try harder next time as well.]
Interview 8

1. How many years have you been using online tools in the course of your teaching?

[That I am teaching? This is my second semester of teaching it.]

2. When did you first start using discussion forums in online teaching?

[Last year.]

Probably would have been from the start?

[Yes, in my role as a teacher.]

3. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way you teach? (not important, equal with every thing else, very important)

[I think when the students participate well I think they are really useful and add another dimension, but I’ve also had the experience when they, people, don’t participate well and they are not used, kept at you know a minimal discussion level then the course still continues without them but it’s not as rich. So it’s sort of like the icing on top of the cake as opposed to the vital part.]

4. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way students learn? (not important, equal with every thing else, very important)

[I think that discussion forums in the way that the course I teach, if they engaged in them (as they are meant to, they don’t!), the way the discussion forums are set up is for them to do more depth of thinking so it’s not like it’s asking them to regurgitate answers, it’s more about them applying what they are learning to their experience. And so if they use it that way like they are meant to I think it would really help them achieve deep learning, but you can’t make people do that. And some people write answers that are more at a superficial level, just regurgitating what the text as opposed to really considering this.]

5. What percentage of your teaching is Online? Blended? Face to face?

[It’s 100% online.]

6. What levels are the courses you teach online? (Undergraduate diploma or certificate, undergraduate degree, post-graduate)
Are the students in the online courses you teach predominantly EFL, if not, what percentage would not be EFL?

[Yes.]

7. What is the prime role of discussion forums in your courses?

[In the course that I teach it is to show their application of the set readings to their experience, so it is more about making connections to what’s important to them, as well as clarification of information if they are not sure. Also, they do different things at different times. At the start of the course it’s for introductions and has a little bit of a communication role and then it moves into more sharing their thoughts are about the work that they have read and what they are doing and hopefully communicate across each other. It can work well and can also not work well.]

8. Do you run any face-to-face sessions teaching students how to use the learning management system and how to use a discussion forum?

[No. I didn’t plan the course but the first activity is they have to introduce themselves and then they have to make links with other people, so it’s trying to teach people learn how to use the tool as well as introductions.]

9. Do you use discussion forums for introductions or icebreakers at the beginning of your online course?

[Once again it just depends on the group. The first year that I ran the course it went well, people took up that opportunity and then this time, you know, a brick wall.]

What would be your average class size?

[In the early teens, 13 this year, last year it was 16.]

10. Do you moderate any of your discussion forums?

[No, but I know on one of the tools that we have in the control panel we can do that.]

11. Do you encourage reflective practices in discussion forums? That is, ask students to post submissions that reflect on their own and other students work.

[Yes, it’s much mostly that.]
12. Do you ask students to reflect on their own work and other students’ work, or just on their own?

[To reflect on their own and then comment on other peoples work.]

13. Do you assess student participation, and by participation I mean level of activity, in any of your online courses?

[No, we haven’t, but that is actually something that we are going to start doing from next year because we’ve had such a poor input this year with people using the discussion forums. So I can definitely see the need but no, currently we don’t but I think it could be a good thing.]

A lot of tutors make the comment that unless you assess something the students don’t do it but at postgraduate level..

[I think what it was, was the first - this course I did myself as a student 3 years ago, it was the first time it was run and we had huge discussion, you know, like you’d turn on the computer and you’d literally have to think ‘Ok, who am I going to read because there was so much in front of you.’]

Can be overwhelming too.

[And so that was my first experience and then the next year they asked me to assist in teaching it and we had not as vocal a group as our first group. It was still pretty good you know but it wasn’t so much as that you’d pick and choose who you would read, and also I was tutoring so I had to read every one but as a student it wasn’t as overwhelming.]

[So the first year we where really into it and it didn’t matter, we got a lot out of it. The second year we still got a lot out, they still talked at least. We did things like ask for feedback half way through to make sure that everyone was OK, and we modified a couple of the activities to encourage them to write more to each other, so we modified the course to increase their participation. And this year, well, we’ve just about done everything that you could think of, other than send dirty emails to them, and it’s still, they still haven’t. But I think the difference is this year we have had 3 people drop out, so that affected it, and we also had 4 honours students and I think that affected the dynamics of the group as well. So I’ve seen it where you don’t need the carrot and stick approach and it works beautifully, but after year’s experience I]
can definitely feel that you do need to assess to make some people value it. It just shouldn’t happen at postgraduate level, it just gob smacks me!

You’ve actually hit the nail on the head there, it’s a question how people value things and sometimes by assessing it doesn’t necessarily make them do it but it does make them value it. They then see, it’s like putting a dollar value on something, they then say that ‘this thing must be of value to the tutor otherwise they wouldn’t be putting marks on it’. Maybe that’s the difference, I’m not sure.

[One of my friends is doing two papers, she’s doing the paper that I’m teaching and she’s doing a paper from another university which is graded on participation and so just in our social conversation she says ‘Oh well, I’ve got to do this first because I get graded on that’. And so even though she is enjoying our paper more the other paper gets priority because it’s graded.]

14. Do you assess student contributions in any of your online courses?

[No, not at the moment.] So you don’t mark them for quality of a posting or quality of a reflection?

[No, I give feedback and thank people for their reflections and expand on a point as a way of saying ‘Hey, thanks for doing that, it was really good’. But as far as an actual grade, no.]

15. What do you consider the barriers that may impede student participation in discussion forums?

[OK, I think a little bit of it can be technology, people are not so confident using the technology, even that can be overwhelming. I’ve had feedback from one of the students that we’ve got at the moment saying that she isn’t confident in her own self, of posting straight on, she feels that might say something wrong, and last year when we had a little bit of lull in the middle and we asked them ‘what is it, what can we do’ and that was that they were a bit afraid you know, to write. The first year everyone just got into it so fast that those fears got overcome quite quickly. I think also the pace has a bit to do with it as well, the course that I’ve had to do is straight into it, it has a huge reading load and I think people fall behind quite quickly and so then they feel embarrassed that they’re back at week one when you’re up to week three.]

Do you have any control over these barriers?
[Yes, things like, this year part of the experience was that people decided at the last minute that they would join the course and so by the time the paper work got sorted the course was 2-3 weeks in and so they were already at a disadvantage. I don’t think I would (for next year) go with that. It’s like you be enrolled on time or not.]

[I think, possibly if I were to structure the course I would perhaps have it a little bit lighter to start of with for the first couple of weeks and perhaps have so that the answers are a little bit more superficial, basic ‘answer these questions’ and so that people can get used to it. I think it has a lot to do with the level of experience of the people. Like we do therapists, that’s who I’m working with so there first activity is to describe a case, so if you’ve been working for a few years that’s easy, but if you’ve been out for just one year that’s little bit more daunting. I think that has a bit to do with it.]

16. What do you consider to be the barriers that may impede student learning in discussion forums? As in what they actually get out of the discussion forum as opposed to barriers to participation.

[Part of it is that you’ve got to have broad enough experience to understand what people are saying. Also, because it’s a sort of dry medium things can be misunderstood. And, a little bit like you were saying before about monitoring what people say so that they don’t offend you could have people think that ‘I don’t understand that’ or ‘I don’t get that’. Because you are not there to discuss it in depth things could be misunderstood.]

[It takes quite a lot of time, even though you may only write a paragraph it doesn’t always just take a paragraph to write. Often you have to word your paragraph several times to get what you want across. It’s an art in itself I think, to write enough so that people know what you’re talking about but not so much that people don’t want to read it.]

[Knowing the tools like spelling, spelling can put a lot of people off, so just some of those sorts of things.]

17. Do you as a tutor have any particular strategies when using discussion forums, particularly when trying to encourage participation, worthwhile contribution and critical reflection?
[Well, for the participation we have a feedback form halfway through to encourage. When people first write, do their first posting they get thanked, everyone gets thanked every time they post, ‘Thank you for posting’. And then usually thank you and building on one of the points they have made for the first few times. It’s not until 3-4 weeks in that I then question or query or extend so like grading how challenging you are depending on the person. So trying to make it a safe learning environment basically.]

[Sometimes I email people separately from the discussion board and say ‘hey, thanks for that’, especially if they have talked to another person or if their comment is on another person and so I email them independently and ‘say thanks for that, that really helps the forum’. A bit of positive reinforcement.]

[I’ve done the whole ‘you’ve paid a lot of money for this, come on you guys’ or ‘you’ve bought an expensive book, you need this other part to get value out of money’. So we’ve done that. And when that hasn’t worked emailing people again and saying ‘heh, are you with us?’, ‘are you going to do the assignment?’, ‘is there anything that I can do?’. Every 2-3 weeks putting yourself out there again to see if there is anything you can do.]
Interview 9

1. How many years have you been using online tools in the course of your teaching?
   [Several years in the late 1990s, and then since 2002, something like 7 years.]

2. When did you first start using discussion forums in online teaching?
   [In the 90s I had asynchronous chat that we used as a teaching tool, and 2002 we started using discussion forums in Blackboard.]

3. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way you teach? (not important, equal with every thing else, very important).
   [I think they are really important. Now we use them in two ways, or I use them in two ways. Our students do fieldwork throughout the country and we set up discussion forums for them, just to provide extra support and so in that situation I find them really useful because the students often raise issues of things in practice or it might be ‘my therapist has asked me to run a group tomorrow, anyone got any ideas?’ So it gives me a feel for how they’re doing although I don’t evaluate them on placement, but it gives me an opportunity to extend their thinking or provide other viewpoints that they can then take into supervision.]

4. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way students learn? (not important, equal with every thing else, very important).
   [In our postgraduate programme I think when they run well you can really see the value for the therapist learning from each other. Sometimes they end up just for questions and answers, and that’s not how we’d like them to be. It’s hard when you’ve got postgraduate students studying part-time and working full-time to commit to using the forums. I’ve some times have managed to get them, with the right group at the right time and you’ll have 3-4 weeks of really excellent discussion work, really see them testing their ideas, questioning each other and those sorts of things.]

5. What percentage of your teaching is Online? Blended? Face to face?
   [On my postgraduate teaching, which is predominantly what I’m doing, and because also I’m on a research track so I only have a little bit of teaching now, it depends on how you define it. We use online, but we also run fortnightly telephone conferences, does that make it blended?]
It’s 100% distance so there’s no face-to-face component and you are just using the internet or the telephone to get your teaching done?

[Yes, that’s right.]

6. What levels are the courses you teach online? (Undergraduate diploma or certificate, undergraduate degree, post-graduate).

[The fieldwork one where I don’t teach them but am involved in supporting the students when they are on placement, that’s an undergraduate degree. And where I actually facilitate learning online is post-graduate.]

7. Are the students in the online courses you teach predominantly EFL, if not, what percentage would not be EFL?

[Yes.]

8. What is the prime role of discussion forums in your courses?

[In the fieldwork it is to provide some ongoing support from the school but also to get the students who spread through out the country who are in similar placement areas sharing their experiences, sharing their resources and helping each other out. Because they could be the only student in that geographical location so they can feel quite isolated so the role of the forums is to actually, like at the moment I’ve got 6 students in child or youth based services through out the country so they are in one discussion forum, they can go into the others as well if they want, but it’s really just to provide a way for me to expand their learning or to challenge them a little way to what somebody else might do, or to be a resource for them.]

[In the postgraduate programme it is very much about peer learning, extending each others’ thinking, it’s also gives us an opportunity to see how people are making sense of the information, and to re-direct them or to challenge or extend them.]

So it would be a fair comment to say you are using it as a feedback mechanism as well?

[Yes, it does. It gives us a feel, if people are quite productively putting their comments, because we’ll say ‘read this article and read this one and in the discussion forum compare and contrast the two’ or ‘talk about the strengths of one or the other’ or ‘how does this help you make sense of something or other’. So you get a sense of what they are thinking which you would not get from a lecture.]
9. Do you run any face-to-face sessions teaching students how to use the learning management system and how to use a discussion forum?

[I didn’t for fieldwork but I believe this time they actually did put it up in class, so it was probably a lecture, and went through the various features of the discussion forum with the students to prepare them before they went on placement – this is first year students.]

[In post-grad, no, we don’t have any face to face sessions.]

10. Do you use discussion forums for introductions or icebreakers at the beginning of your online course?

[Yes.]

How successful are these?

[They usually have the most postings in them, people kind of start of with a hiss and a roar and they’re quite good at introducing themselves or making connections or, which is the sort of thing we are trying to do is sort of get them used to being on the site and going back to the site and checking in. It’s actually a preliminary to getting them to commit to being there. People get a sense of who is on the course, sometimes they recognise people from, that they’ve worked with before or studied with before even.]

11. Do you moderate any of your discussion forums?

[Neither in the fieldwork or in post-grad. I do know that, I think I’ve done it and I’ve noticed in the last fieldwork place the lecturer, one of the other lecturers saw something in one of the forums she was facilitating that he was inappropriate to be there and she removed the posting. But it would have been seen by some students before she got it off. But that hasn’t made us shift to wanting to pre-moderate and for post-grad, no.]

12. Do you encourage reflective practices in discussion forums? That is, ask students to post submissions that reflect on their own and other students work.

[Well very much the fieldwork one is, it’s for students to reflect on they’ve seen, or thinking or doing, as well as problem solving or resource sharing.]
[Post-grad yes, a lot of our study questions we then say ‘post your own synthesis to the question in the discussion forum’, it can be a reflective one. And to take this information and think about the value of it for your practice.]

At that point do you also ask students to reflect on other students’ submissions?

[Yes, we try to get them to do that, so there might be ‘once you’ve done your postings please come back and see what others say, do you agree, do you disagree. What does it make you think about’.]

13. Do you assess student participation, and by participation I mean level of activity, in any of your online courses?

[No, but we starting to consider it for post-grad. It’s a way of forcing them into the site really. We’ve seen it where we’ve managed to get them actively going, like I’ve had, at different times, quite a productive discussion for 3 weeks or something and it’s like at the end of it people say ‘that was really good’, ‘Oh, I wish we had done this earlier’. But earlier they don’t put the priority to it because they don’t see what they could get from it.]

14. Do you assess student contributions in any of your online courses? In other words you mark the quality of what they’re discussing or putting up?

[No.]

15. What do you consider the barriers that may impede student participation in discussion forums?

[I think there are several barriers, we run on Blackboard 7 now and the discussion forums have actually got more clunky in that you put what the discussion forum is about and then, because you’ve often got people that are new to posting in online forums then you end up putting a posting in to start them and then they are hitting reply to that there are 2-3 clicks before they get to actually putting their information in.]

[The other problem is threaded discussions. If someone has been not online for 2 or 3 weeks they can come back and there is just so much to look at it is just too overwhelming. So they don’t go ahead with it.]

[For people new to post-grad study, and these are therapists who might have done their diplomas 20 years ago or a bachelors even 5 years ago, they can feel anxious]
about the quality of what they are posting and feel that they might be judged for it, or that they can’t really put it together in good words yet, and I think that that sometimes stops them going there. Even though we provide them with instructions, and they are quite well written out instructions, they get so much, well I don’t think they get a lot of information at the beginning of the course, but they are so anxious to get into the learning of the course and to read the resources that we are giving them and be involved in the tele-conferences I think they forget that they’ve got those instructions. And they are so busy that they just kind of see if they can problem solve it themselves, and occupational therapists are mostly techno-phobic and so if they don’t succeed very quickly they stop trying and then I think they get (and some of the feedback that we’ve got back through third party is that they either have got frustrated and given up and haven’t thought to ring us to be talked through it or they are embarrassed because they don’t know how to do it and they don’t want to ring and say ‘I don’t know how to do this’. So there is quite a few barriers that can impede their discussion.]

[Whether they are on dial-up or broadband. If you’ve got a particularly productive discussion and you’re on dial-up and an older computer it just takes too long to download and that’s another problem with Blackboard 7, it’s got too big. Or it takes too much time and so that stops them because they can’t get everything straight away so it’s like ‘I haven’t got time to wait for this to download, I’ll just move on.’]

Do you have any control over these barriers?

[Not dial-up anyway! Instructions, I mean we’ve talked about CD ROMS for those more visual learners, we try to encourage people to call us so that we can talk it through. We are talking with IT trying or considering how they can do a 24 hour help desk because often therapists are doing that in the evening and of course they won’t call us at home in the evenings and if I’ve got a number of calls at home my family start to get a bit annoyed as well. So if we had a 24 hour help desk I think that would probably help if people then felt comfortable to ring, had good support, that they could predict what the problems would be at the other end.]

[Not much that I can do about time that the therapists have got to give to their studies, that’s a fact of life, that’s who we are working with. Have thought and tried moving out of Blackboard discussion forums into Google documents because it gives you all
something like wiki spaces but therapists have tried but their level of problem solving is not great, so if they get a pop-up blocker they don’t often see the little, and it’s always a very tiny message, that says you’ve been blocked, or if they see it they don’t know what to do with it, or they get worried that it might let a virus in so then they stop. So we keep kind of looking at the notion of some kind of wiki that would enable that much easier interjecting, putting your comment where it fitted rather than having to thread it. If we could build their skill enough we would get there, and their skills compared with what they had 4 years ago when we first started have really ramped up, but maybe another couple of years.

16. What do you consider to be the barriers that may impede student learning in discussion forums?

[Oh, learning as opposed to participation, for me one follows the other because if you can’t participate then you can’t access the learning and I my Masters about 96-97 on that online course and what someone told me in one of the interviews which was very, very clear was she said ‘until I could grasp the technology and feel comfortable with what I was supposed to be doing in front of the computer, I couldn’t access the learning’ and she talked about, ‘in one of the chats one night all of the sudden the computer just disappeared and I felt like I was in class’.

Great comment.

[It was a wonderful comment because it was for me such a very clear way of saying ‘while I grappled with the technology, tried to problem solve my way through it (we had quite good support in that course) it was just too difficult to get to the learning. Once I felt comfortable with what I was using then that disappeared and I was in class and ready to learn’.

[And the Ministry of Education, special education, it’s a similar thing when they are talking about kids with special needs in classes, they are now using the outcome indicators presence, participation and learning. And until you are present and participating you can’t learn and it’s the same for online. If you’re not even present you are not going to get there, but you can be kind of present but not able to participate.]
17. Do you as a tutor have any particular strategies when using discussion forums, particularly when trying to encourage participation, worthwhile contribution and critical reflection?

[It would be the same strategies that I would use in class, so it’s that open questioning, that encouraging of any comments, reflecting back what people have said, connecting up, asking specific people to comment back on some else’s, you know, you’re saying something similar here to so ‘n so said back to your posting, perhaps you’d like to go back and comment on their’s. Trying to model what it is that you want, when someone produces what you want, or you think it’s really good, reinforcing that so that people have an idea of what you might be looking for.]

[I don’t see the facility, online discussions, any different to what I do facilitating discussions in a tutorial.]
Interview 10

1. How many years have you been using online tools in the course of your teaching?

[I started off 4 years ago and then I had a break so I did it for a year and then I’ve only just started coming back on it again. So how many years, probably about 2.]

2. When did you first start using discussion forums in online teaching?

[This year.]

3. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way you teach? (not important, equal with every thing else, very important).

[Oh, very important.]

4. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way students learn? (not important, equal with every thing else, very important).

[Very important.]

5. What percentage of your teaching is Online? Blended? Face to face?

[My percentage at this stage is 100% online.]

6. What levels are the courses you teach online? (Undergraduate diploma or certificate, undergraduate degree, post-graduate).

[Well it’s difficult actually. At this particular stage it would be equivalent to level 5, undergraduate.]

7. Are the students in the online courses you teach predominantly EFL, if not, what percentage would not be EFL?

[They are all English speaking and I have no problems with them.]

There is no impact?

[There is no impact at all.]

8. What is the prime role of discussion forums in your courses?

[Participation with regards to the students going backwards and forwards to each other. Just to get information so they can either do group or individual activities.]
9. Do you run any face-to-face sessions teaching students how to use the learning management system and how to use a discussion forum?

[No.]

10. Do you use discussion forums for introductions or icebreakers at the beginning of your online course?

[We do actually. We put a programme together for what we use is Welcome and that is for everybody to actually come on board and just sort of say ‘here I am’ and they are pretty successful, it gets everybody together.]

11. Do you moderate any of your discussion forums?

[No, we don’t.]

12. Do you encourage reflective practices in discussion forums? That is, ask students to post submissions that reflect on their own and other students work.

[I do but I normally get nothing back! I sent one out and like that Aussie programme said ‘Where the bloody hell are you?’ because some people had ‘yes, I’m committed’ and I want them to put all their stuff in their discussion forums but they never come back to me when I say ‘Hey, that was really good, what do you think about…’ and I get silence.]

13. Do you assess student participation, and by participation I mean level of activity, in any of your online courses?

[Yes, all the time.]

So there is a definite weighting in terms of marks on participation.

[There is a weighting all the way the way through and we have a grading system on that as well and again it fluctuates, I suppose a lot depends upon what their private lives are but in my business courses they are expected to do this because it’s an organisation. And I’ve got 6000 students that I have to teach and we’re putting through at this stage 16 every three months so it’s a long time. But it’s all in personal development and other things as we go through.]

14. Do you assess student contributions in any of your online courses? In other words you mark the quality of what they’re discussing or putting up?
[All the time, our gradings are done individually as well as teamwork. We put them in teams of 4 and whatever they put through I’m always writing back to them and always saying this that and the other and again I’ve had good feedback from this.]

15. What do you consider the barriers that may impede student participation in discussion forums?

[The biggest barrier that I see is people that do not participate. They enrol but they don’t participate which leaves the other people out on a limb and then they lose motivation. So most of my time is actually motivating people on and I basically, to overcome the problem that if they drop out I just rearrange my groups back in so that the people that are wanting to learn stay within the groups.]

16. What do you consider to be the barriers that may impede student learning in discussion forums?

[I think the work commitment that they have outside online learning, family life, work, social life and they probably just don’t do good time management, and then after that happens of course they just drop out because it becomes all too hard. I suppose when you talk about barriers as well there’s a huge amount from what I’ve seen with the people I’ve got that is work commitments and trying to find the time.]

17. Do you as a tutor have any particular strategies when using discussion forums, particularly when trying to encourage participation, worthwhile contribution and critical reflection?

[My strategy is simple. If they reply, and they are putting all the stuff through all I do is just come back and say ‘absolutely awesome’ and motivate them. And provided you are always in contact with that person and give them that encouragement and taking the initiative and what have you they’ll always come back. I’ve had good feedback from this. They take the bait and feel good, it’s just communication, you’ve just got to keep in touch with them all the time. And that’s all I do, I’m just a facilitator, I put out good thoughts and processes on them and everybody enjoys it.]
Interview 11

1. How many years have you been using online tools in the course of your teaching?
[Just the one year.]

2. When did you first start using discussion forums in online teaching?
[This year.]

3. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way you teach? (not important, equal with everything else, very important).
[Very important.]

4. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way students learn? (not important, equal with everything else, very important).
[Very important.]

5. What percentage of your teaching is Online? Blended? Face to face?
[I teach 3 papers, 2 of which are totally online, the third is blended.]

6. What levels are the courses you teach online? (Undergraduate diploma or certificate, undergraduate degree, post-graduate).
[Levels 5 and 6.]

7. Are the students in the online courses you teach predominantly EFL, if not, what percentage would not be EFL?
[All English speaking.]

8. What is the prime role of discussion forums in your courses?
[To promote interaction between the students.]

9. Do you run any face-to-face sessions teaching students how to use the learning management system and how to use a discussion forum?
[Yes. We do this in our orientation week with lab sessions along with how to use the computer network, logging in and using the library resources.]

10. Do you use discussion forums for introductions or icebreakers at the beginning of your online course?
[I do but only to introduce myself. I don’t ask the students to introduce themselves.]

11. Do you moderate any of your discussion forums?

[No, we don’t do any assessment.]

By moderate I mean not letting the other students see a student posting until after you have checked it.

[No.]

12. Do you encourage reflective practices in discussion forums? That is, ask students to post submissions that reflect on their own and other students work.

[Yes. When a student asks a question I often refer them to other students’ postings and to my own response somewhere else. I also refer them back to their textbook if it is obvious they haven’t read the required material and are looking for a quick answer.]

13. Do you assess student participation, and by participation I mean level of activity, in any of your online courses?

[No.]

14. Do you assess student contributions in any of your online courses? In other words you mark the quality of what they’re discussing or putting up?

[No.]

15. What do you consider the barriers that may impede student participation in discussion forums?

[I think the initial process of logging in and becoming used to the software can be a bit scary for some.]

16. What do you consider to be the barriers that may impede student learning in discussion forums?

[Mainly that it is completely text based at the moment. If we could include diagrams in the discussion as a way of describing what we are talking about it would be good. Microsoft’s OCS software does this very well. It is the reason we don’t do any online assessment as we frequently ask our students to draw diagrams of this or that. I teach human biology so this is quite important to me.]
17. Do you as a tutor have any particular strategies when using discussion forums, particularly when trying to encourage participation, worthwhile contribution and critical reflection?

[I try to turn the forums into a resource for the students. So that if they can’t find an answer to something the first place they look is the discussion forum. To either find an answer in there or to ask me or the other students about the problem.]
Interview 12

1. How many years have you been using online tools in the course of your teaching?

[I can’t remember the number but you’d know because it was with that class with you.]

Eight years.

[Eight years]

2. When did you first start using discussion forums in online teaching?

[That year. So was that 2001?]

2000.

3. How do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way you teach? (not important, equal with every thing else, very important).

[On that course it was important because we were specifically investigating that side of things. Most of what I’m teaching now of course is only the blended delivery and I’m using it as a vehicle basically for supporting class-room students. So at this point as an actual teaching tool I don’t see it as being a particularly important feature but I think it is important that we are teaching the students how to become familiar with that now because I can see further down the line a lot of our students are going to end up doing online, potentially. And if they start getting used to the concepts now it’s going to stand them in stead later on. It’s just another tool that we are giving them.]

4. OK, this may be a bit of a moot point then, but how do you rate discussion forums as an important feature in the way students learn? (not important, equal with every thing else, very important).

[That’s a different question you see, because it’s not necessarily how my students learn. I would now rate this back to what I was doing when I was doing the study up in British Columbia. I rate it actually very highly, for me as a student, because particularly, I mean that was from the point of view where I was a remote student by myself and therefore there was nobody around me where I could discuss stuff with so it had to be online. And that was really useful because if you had questions or if you wanted to expand on ideas and things (I know I’m just sort of following the pattern)]
but certainly for me that was the way it turned out. After the first paper it was a real struggle because I was a kind of a little overawed with the company I was in I think and I rather suspect, one of the papers I did was the ‘social impact of online learning’ and just the comments that people were making in that paper I don’t think I was the only one who was getting that. A lot people who were the first time up were getting that problem. But by the time we did that paper I (that was about my third paper) I was feeling a lot more comfortable about it then. Yeah, certainly I think for exploring ideas and getting feedback and getting some interaction with students I think that was a really important part of it.

5. What percentage of your teaching is Online? Blended? Face to face?

[It’s pretty much all face to face at this point. And the blended stuff, it’s really only pseudo-blended, you know, just to serve a purpose.]

6. What levels are the courses you teach online? (Undergraduate diploma or certificate, undergraduate degree, post-graduate).

[Ah well, I’m not teaching any online but I’m preparing one now which is the first year, under-grad degree. Well, it’s the combination Diploma (Computer Concepts) so it’s first year degree.]

Level 5?

[Level 5, yeah.]

7. Are the students in the online courses you teach predominantly EFL, if not, what percentage would not be EFL?

[Online courses? Yeah, they would be, but some of the material I’ve developed has been for ESL students because that was fairly interesting stuff.]

8. What is the prime role of discussion forums in your courses?

[The courses I’m teaching now, well two things. One is I’m trying to give them the opportunity for orientation into that. It gives them the opportunity to communicate with me at any time. They don’t have to wait till they come to class. So for instance if I’m teaching a class (which I am) Tuesday and Wednesday night only, if they didn’t have any communication with me for the stuff I wanted them to do for the rest of the week and over the weekend then they’d have to wait till the following Tuesday to ask questions so it makes me available to the students at any time. Particularly these ones]
because they are also working people so they can’t just slot down to the polytechnic or phone me up something like that so I do occasionally get communication in that way. Is that way you’re looking for?]

Yeah, if that’s your prime role. Do you use file uploads or facilitate moving stuff around?

[I do sometimes use the forums for that but these days I’m now more commonly using the assignment submission areas for that. So it’s not forums as such. We did, just the other night, we used the forum actually as part of our class (it gave them an opportunity to see how it worked as well), I had them working on a file and then I wanted to swap the files around, and so we just said ‘OK, poke them up onto the forum and then go and pick someone else’s file from there’. So it was quite useful from that point of view. And of course you could see where that would be really useful for online students too if you wanted to do that exercise for online students. Exactly the same thing, they could then use that facility to swap stuff around and compare and so on.]

9. Do you run any face-to-face sessions teaching students how to use the learning management system and how to use a discussion forum?

[Yes I do. I do that as the first session of my teaching. And I guess in a way it’s kind of similar (I’m a bit of a fan of the method that people use if they can where they have students in for an orientation or they call it induction I think and they’re doing it for the business stuff – they have them in part of the day and they go through that process). So what I do basically is go through the same process exactly as if those students were going to be online students. I show them all the bits and pieces, get them to set up their profile, I take them into a forum, show them the alerts and the subscriptions and all that stuff. I didn’t used to do it specifically but in the last year or so I’ve made that a specific start off point. So to make sure that the students are quite familiar with what the system is, particularly because I’m using them for (not forums, I’m using Moodle) OK, it depends what you’re talking about. I use Moodle to give them stuff to read, readings, but that’s not necessarily through a forum.]

That’s OK,

[That’s just making resources available online.]

So you do it both for the general LMS and the discussion forum?

158
[Sorry?]

You do it both for Moodle and for the discussion forum?

[Oh, yes. I cover the whole thing, because that’s the environment we want them to become familiar with.]

10. Do you use discussion forums for introductions or icebreakers at the beginning of your online course?

[No, well, yes and no. Well actually yes I do, not so much as an icebreaker because I’m not a real fan of icebreakers but I do have, the first forum in there is always a sign in and introductions and I want them to just go in there and state who they are, a couple of things about who they are and there is instructions in there. So that’s just all part of the orientation thing at this stag. I would get them to do that as part of an induction day if they were here and if they weren’t here then I would ask them to do that remotely. It’s kind of interesting because the use of forums for face-to-face classes is not always that successful. I’ve got a class there now, the first year BAppIS, there’s 17 in there, I think so far 3 have signed in through the forum. Last time I looked only just over half of them had actually ever logged into Moodle, and what has happened as a result, you see I don’t have them in a lab and that makes it a bit more difficult to do but looking at it this year probably for next year I would actually take that class into a lab, book a lab for a session if I could. I think it’s a programme problem, most of us are asking them to use Moodle and I think it would be a good thing for the programme to have some sort of induction for our students.]

And I also think it would be good in an ordinary lab as opposed to B17 because I have the problem of them not being set up to use that lab at the start. So it would probably be a second week exercise.

[I think there would be some real merit in getting all our students in, get all their logins sorted out and get them through a Moodle orientation thing. There’s enough of us using it now there’s got to be some benefit in that.]

11. Do you moderate any of your discussion forums?

[No, it’s something we thought about a lot in the past and decided we should monitor them and you should make sure things don’t get totally out of hand. But no, no pre-moderation. I think because we are talking about adults here. I think it would be a]
different story if you were at the high school or at the lower level, you’d have to be real careful there what went on there.]

12. Do you encourage reflective practices in discussion forums? That is, ask students to post submissions that reflect on their own and other students work.

[I try to encourage it, but we have a bit of a problem. Most of the stuff I am doing is prescription driven, in particular Computer Concepts is one which I am focusing on at this point, and NZQA have made it quite clear that there is no ability to allocate marks for that type of activity. We can only allocate marks specifically against items in the prescription, so you’ve either got to get really inventive about how you get around that, or just to relax and say well we can encourage them but we can’t force them to do it. It might turn into a bit of a problem in a way I think. On the one hand everything you do has to be prescription aligned and of course these days now they’ve gone the unit standards way in Computer Concepts, every element must be assessed. But you’ve also go to be able to certify that a certain percentage (I think it’s over 50%) of their work is actually their work. And of course as soon as you start doing stuff in discussion forums and allocating marks to it you can’t guarantee that it’s their work so it does make it difficult. The other thing is that it seems to be a Kiwi thing in a way, a lot of students are not comfortable critiquing others, and further to that to, something I notice when I take photographs, Kiwi students don’t want their photo to be taken, but you get the international students and they just pop up in front of the camera and they smile away and you take the photo and everything’s great. For instance I certainly would not use the students allocating rankings or rating against other students postings. There is a danger there because if you’ve got someone who is a bit timid and someone gives them a bad rating (even if they deserve it) that’s very counter-productive, you’re going to knock those people off the edge. The idea is to encourage them to be there, not to be discouraged.
]

13. Do you assess student participation, and by participation I mean level of activity, in any of your online courses?

[I do in some. I am starting to build that in, because it’s our internal degree I build a component in there that they are required to participate. I am still playing around with exactly how you go doing that though. At this stage my main focus is just getting them to participate, rather than necessarily the quality of the participation. At the
level 5 I think that that is the important thing is actually to get them to participate, get them comfortable with the idea that they can do that. I can see that when you go up further with level 6 and level 7 then you would maybe be looking at their contribution as well as just the act of participation. At this stage I am not teaching any courses at that level.

14. Do you assess student contributions in any of your online courses? In other words you mark the quality of what they’re discussing or putting up?

[Not so much assess them. What I will do is go in, I’ll look at their stuff and if necessary I’ll throw additional questions if I think they haven’t done a good enough job or could do a better one job I would encourage them to take another look and maybe expand on what they’ve said. Exactly the same as what you would in a class, if a student gives you an answer in a class you say ‘well hang on, I’m not quite sure what you’re on about there, can you just elaborate on that. I think that that’s the sort of thing we should be doing in those forums.]

Is authenticity of student work an issue?

[I don’t personally see it as an issue. I take the view that at our level of education that students should be there because they want to, and that they are actually trying to learn something and that their contributions are their own as part of their learning thing. If they are going to fiddle the system (and we know some do, certainly at the level 5 level) somewhere down the line it’s going to catch up with them. If they bluff their way through the level 5’s eventually they are going to hit somewhere where they can’t bluff anymore so it’s apparent that they haven’t picked up the prerequisite stuff. I’m not too worried about authenticity at that level.]

15. What do you consider the barriers that may impede student participation in discussion forums?

[I think the first barrier is a cultural thing. I’m really sure of it. The second barrier is I think for most students it’s comparatively new, the whole concept, that you’re dropping them into an environment where they are not particularly comfortable. People say ‘well is it any different to being in a classroom?’ Well, yes it is because when you are in a classroom it’s quite clear that you’re among your peers. When you’re online it is not quite so clear because you’re by yourself and until you get to a place where you’ve maybe established some sort of rapport between your students a]
student is just out on their lonesome. They don’t really know how they’re going to be
taken by the students. It’s a bit easier in a classroom, also, because in a classroom
you’re stuck in that position whereas online you have the option of not participating
or opting out if you want to which a lot of them do. A third barrier is unfortunately a
lot of our students don’t have good communication skills. Their levels of language are
very poor, their levels of writing are very poor and I think that becoming a barrier
too.

And you think that they are conscious of this?

[I don’t think that they realise it. I mean, you walk into a classroom and see that there
is a lot of over-cocky students in there and you get the same thing online. They don’t
recognise for quite some time (at the 500 level), they don’t realise that they’ve got a
lot of shortcomings, stuff that they’ve got to learn. And that’s why, coming back to
back to my earlier statement, that’s why I think it’s important we start getting them
used to this environment now. We may not be doing a particularly, or having great
success at this level but at least it means if they get up to level 6 or 7 where they do
need to be functioning within that environment at least they are not getting dropped in
cold like what they are right now. I think it’s the dropped in cold thing that’s the
biggest problem, it’s a foreign environment, they are not comfortable and they are
able to avoid it, so they do.]

So do you think you have any control over those barriers?

[Not really. All you do is harangue them right, OK, you can encourage them to do it,
putting some of the readings up there is an approach because on the one hand it is
encouraging them to go into the system and look around, and on the other hand, you
know darn well that as a result some of them don’t do the readings. If you were to put
a piece of paper in their hand it’s more likely that they would but not guaranteed.]

16. What do you consider to be the barriers that may impede student learning in
discussion forums?

[I just trying to.. um.. participation and learning?]

Students can quite easily participate but not necessarily learn.

[That’s going to up to the nature of some of the students isn’t it. There are students as
we well know who are more interested in telling you what they know rather than

162
learning something new. That’s one of the weakness I guess of a forum (it’s the same in the classroom too) which doesn’t mean it’s wasted effort. If a student gets into a forum or speaks in the classroom and they tell you something they know a fair bit about other students are going to be learning something from that, it’s not wasted. But as to THAT student learning?

One of the biggest things is their own lack of awareness, that’s coming back to the reflective stuff of course. Kiwis generally I think are not that reflective. A lot of slap-dash stuff goes on. I think the barriers to student learning in discussion forums is probably very much the same as the barriers to them learning per se in a class room or from a book. It takes some students a period of time, a passage of time, and exposure to the environment, that somewhere the little switch clicks over and then they realise what they’ve got to start doing to help their own learning. Some students take awhile to get there.

17. Do you as a tutor have any particular strategies when using discussion forums, particularly when trying to encourage participation, worthwhile contribution and critical reflection?

[Scaffolding, I think is really important, someone leading the way. I’ll tell you want happened when I was up in Keri Keri the other week. I said to the class, ‘OK, what sort of computer do you have?’ That was a sort of scaffolding thing because the first guy said a ‘desktop’ and everybody followed suit with desktops or laptops. And then we went a second round and they gave me the brand. Eventually we got down to I said ‘what I’ve got’ and told them what my processor was and they got the idea and followed it on.

We cannot say on the one hand that we acknowledge that we’ve dropped them into a foreign environment but then ‘but they’ve got to work it out’, because they are not going to work it out. Or if they do work it out they might work out strategies for coping or surviving in there rather than necessarily what you want. So I think that if you’re wanting stuff from them the encouragement and the scaffolding, being in there and setting the standard, the tone and so on is important. It’s not easy to do, very time consuming. I can still remember that first course, the amount of time I had to put into doing it. Part of it was because I didn’t have a frigging clue what I was doing. I too had to learn how to write, it’s an entirely different thing, speaking to a group of
people or writing some thing for that group of people. We’ve got to be aware that if it’s difficult for us it’s going to be even more difficult for them because they’ve had less years practice at it.]