

## Politeness and Face in Digitally Reconfigured E-learning Spaces

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**Abstract:** This paper has two starting points. The first is a theorization about the way in which “rhetorical space” is reshaped in asynchronous, online, learning environments. In particular, an asynchronous bulletin-board (ABB) discussion offers both opportunities and constraints for teaching and learning. The learning that occurs will be affected by the affordances implicit in the design of the conversational space itself and the communicative practices engaged in by both teachers and students. The second starting point is a small case study, utilizing action research and discourse analytical strategies, whose research participants were the author and students involved in “delivering” and “receiving” an online education course at post-graduate level using asynchronous discussion. The course, taught in English, had a mix of Chinese students (for whom English was an additional language) and native English speakers. The paper will report on students’ perceptions of what worked for them and what didn’t in respect of this elearning environment. It will also use concepts such as politeness, face and positioning to analyse aspects of the participants’ communicative practices and will draw conclusions from these in respect of how successful learning can occur in elearning environments with multicultural and multilingual students. It will make connections between the findings of this case study and other research on asynchronous, web-based learning and will make some suggestions about what is needed in respect of the future research agenda.

“A smile adds face value”

*Roadside billboard, Auckland, NZ*

This paper is premised on two assertions. The first is that the asynchronous bulletin board, one of the cornerstones of distance learning, is a particular kind of rhetorical space. The second is that a rhetorical space is inevitably reshaped or reconfigured by its attendant technologies. On the basis of these two assertions, we present a view of the reconfigured rhetorical space associated with ABBs as having a number of dimensions, each of which can have a role to play in the “success” or otherwise of an ABB as a component of a (totally or in part) online, course delivery system.

The academic literature on online asynchronous discussion indicates a number of trends in respect of the character of the interactions which occur and factors which have a bearing on the success of the learning which occurs. The latter include: the design of the learning interface, the role of the teacher (or lecturer or tutor), the nature of the interaction which occurs, and the composition of particular class (for example, ethnic or gender mix, as well as aspects of communicative competence). We review some of these briefly. However, our main research focus is the nature and quality of participant interaction in an ABB, drawing on data from a post-graduate course taught entirely online at a New Zealand university. In this small-scale case study, we believe we are justified in viewing the student participants and course lecturers as constituting what we might call a “community of practice” (Wenger 1998) in the making (*in potentia*). Using discourse analysis, we identify particular patterns in the participant interactions, with a particular emphasis on politeness and face, and discuss the implications of these for successful online teaching and learning using asynchronous discussion.

### Dimensions of Rhetorical Space

The notion of a rhetorical space involves a number of important recognitions. The first of these is that a speaker is always, as Bakhtin noted, a respondent:

*He [sic] is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe. And he presupposes not only the existence of the language system he is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances – his own and others’ – with which his given utterance enters into one kind of relation or another (builds on them, polemicizes with them, or simply presumes that they are already known to the listener). Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances (1986, p. 69).*

As Bakhtin further noted, the notion of being a respondent not only involves a relationship to “preceding utterances”; it also includes a relationship to those to whom one’s utterance (written or spoken) is potentially addressed. We have moved here beyond the literal space of the Greek forum, to think of the rhetorical space as metaphorical – as having a temporal or historical dimension.

In a recent article, Morten Søby quotes Freud – ‘Man has, as it were, become a sort of prosthetic God’ (Freud 1962, p. 38, cited in Søby, 2005, “Formatting Cyberspace” ¶6) – and notes that ICT can be thought of in prosthetic terms, as an extension of the body and the senses. However, technology is not just an add-on that enhances human cognition. As Walter Ong (1982) argues, in respect of writing, technology has the power, directly and indirectly, to shape human thought processes (consciousness). A technology, then, is more than just an aid to learning. It shapes the cognitive processes that underpin learning. Furthermore, because the uses of technology are culturally mediated, technologically mediated learning is necessarily shaped discursively by the practices around technology

privileged in a particular cultural milieu. We inhabit a text-saturated world, which we negotiate via a repertoire of textual practices that are at once cognitive, social, and *themselves* technologies.

There are, we submit, two dimensions of Bakhtin's chain metaphor, which are relevant to any consideration of a speaker's communicative activity in a rhetorical space, whether it be a Greek forum or the digitally constructed space of an asynchronous bulletin board. These are 1) *reach* (chains vary in length), and 2) *connection* (the links in a chain can connect in differing ways). We will consider each of these in turn, and use these considerations as a frame for discussing the effectiveness of asynchronous bulletin boards (henceforth ABBs) for online or distance learning as reported in a range of the academic literature, and for the research discussed later in this paper.

### Reach

We suggest there are two aspects to the dimension of reach, field and company (or membership).

In respect of field, we might distinguish two kinds (or axes):

- *Depth of historical field*: This refers to the temporal scope of intertextual and interdiscursive historical reference, both retrospective and anticipative. This is the historical axis of reference.
- *Breadth of contemporary field*: This refers to the range of intertextual and interdiscursive reference that can be thought of as roughly contemporaneous.

In respect of the aspect of company, we can also distinguish three kinds:

- *Overt company*: Those conversants or participants who regularly engage in utterance (Bakhtin 1986) exchange. In many online platforms, this is synonymous with the "access list".
- *Covert company*: Onlookers who have opportunities to observe the exchanges of the overt company but whose presence will be unsuspected.
- *Implied company*: Those conversants or "addressees" whose "presence" is implied in a particular utterance. The writer of an article on a course reading list would be an example of this. However, should that writer be invited to participate in the discussion as a guest, he or she would become a member of the overt company.

### Connection

We use the term connection to embrace various aspects of participant activity within a rhetorical space, however "natural" or technologically mediated.

The first of these relates to duration and continuity. Duration refers to the real time taken up by a discussion and is marked by an inpoint and outpoint. The word "discussion" here refers to a formally constituted, topic-centred conversation established in the context of a learning institution or environment. In terms of an ABB discussion, duration is marked by an imposed beginning date and completion date. Continuous discussion has an inpoint and outpoint in real time and no gaps. Continual

discussion has an inpoint and outpoint in real time and is intermittent. An ABB is an example of this.

The second and third aspects relate to an individual member's participatory behaviour. The second relates to a participant's participation rate:

- *Absolute participation rate*: This is the number of utterances a participant makes in a single discussion.
- *Relative participation rate*: This is the number of utterances a participant makes as a percentage of all utterances in a single discussion.

The third aspect relates to the concept of feedback, a verbal or non-verbal signal that acknowledges an utterance.

- *Feedback spread*: This is the number of participants in the overt company a particular participant offers unsolicited feedback to, expressed as a percentage of the number of participants in the overt company minus one.
- *Feedback rate*: This is the total number of feedback instances a participant produces as a percentage of his or her total number of utterances in a discussion. A percentage of more than 100 would indicate that a participant is at times acknowledging the contributions of a number of participants within a single utterance<sup>1</sup>.

A fourth aspect of connection has to do with ways in which the overt company collectively addresses the topic of a discussion.

- *Degree of convergence*: This refers to the extent to which the overt company appears to be achieving a consensus on a particular topic, that is, a kind of discursive alignment.
- *Degree of divergence*: This refers to the extent to which the overt company appears to be failing to realize a consensus on a particular topic, that is, a kind of discursive non-alignment.
- *Degree of congeniality*: This refers to the extent to which the overt company appears comfortable with divergence.

We make the point that neither convergence nor divergence are per se desirable outcomes of a discussion. Different discourses of learning will vary in respect of their valuing of either of these. However, politeness strategies (see next section) have a major role to play in the way congeniality is achieved.

Finally, and perhaps most vaguely, we posit a fifth aspect of connection referring to the ways in which the utterances that constitute a discussion inter-connect or cohere. We use the term *structuration* to refer to the logic or principles governing the sequence and inter-relationship of utterances within a discussion. It is clear that the factors that govern

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<sup>1</sup> We concede that these are crude measures and overlook qualitative differences in types of feedback, depth of feedback and considerations such as delay (how much "time" has elapsed between the feedback message and the original message in a thread).

turn-taking and coherence in an ABB differ from those that operate in synchronous, face-to-face discussion. There may be teacher-initiated design features that impact upon sequence. Some may relate to the interactive behaviour and predispositions of various members of the overt company. Others may relate to aspects of the platform itself. At another level, we suspect that at least in part the structuration of an ABB discussion is likely to be characterized by rhizome-type connectivity (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), described as follows by Semetsky:

*Rhizome as embedded in the perplexity of the situation, going in diverse directions instead of a single path, multiplying its own lines and establishing the plurality of unpredictable connections in the open-ended, what Deleuze called smooth, space of its growth. (Semetsky 2003, 18)*

Putting it another way, considerations of the structuration of an ABB discussion need to be posited on the co-existence of both hierarchical and non-hierarchical principles of order / disorder.<sup>2</sup>

### Politeness Theory

Politeness theory was first proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978) and has been extensively developed since this time. While the theory has had its share of critics (see, for example, Eelen 2001), it nevertheless offers a useful framework for the analysis of discourse and speech acts. In relation to politeness theory, the concept of “face” can be defined as “the positive self-value a person effectively claims for himself [sic]” (Goffman 1967, p. 5), or “every individual’s feeling of self-worth or self-image” (Thomas 1995, p. 169).

Politeness theory identifies two aspects of individuals’ “face”, their *positive* and *negative* face needs. Positive face needs include individuals’ need to be approved of and liked by others, and to have their wishes and desires shared and respected. Negative face needs relate to individuals’ need for privacy and distance from others, and to have their autonomy and independence respected. In terms of this theory, a “face-threatening act” (FTA) is one which potentially threatens either one’s positive or negative face. In the context of an ABB, a remark bluntly disagreeing with an opinion of another participant would be an example of FTA threatening that person’s positive face. A remark which appeared to question another participant’s *right* to disagree would be an example of a FTA threatening that person’s negative face. Positive politeness strategies, such as in-group identity markers, forms of address, jargon and slang (Brown and Levinson 1987), can be used both to enhance an addressee’s face and to mitigate the impact of a FTA. Negative politeness strategies, such as being indirect, adopting hedging devices, or apologizing, can also be used to ameliorate the impact of a FTA.

While we would agree that politeness tends to be universal phenomenon found in every culture, we would concur with Gu (in his 1990 account of politeness phenomena in

modern Chinese) that “what counts as polite behaviour (including values and norms attached to such behaviour) is...culture-specific and language-specific” (p. 256). Mao (1994) challenges the universal validity of Brown and Levinson’s concepts of negative and positive face, arguing that “face in the Chinese and Japanese context constitutes a publicly negotiated image” (p. 471). To account for this divergence, he invents an “interactional construct” which he calls the “relative face orientation”, a socially situated tendency towards one of two

*interactional ideals that may be salient in a given speech community: the ideal social identity, or the ideal individual autonomy. The specific content of face in a given speech community is determined by one of these two interactional ideals sanctioned by the members of the community (pp. 471-2).*

Mao’s analysis of Chinese and Japanese politeness practices leads him to argue that the face orientation of these cultural groups “privileges group harmony over individual freedom of action” and therefore tends to emulate an “ideal social identity” which gives rise to a “*public* image” [his emphasis]. In contrast, “Brown and Levinson’s formulation of face is oriented toward an ideal individual autonomy; such an orientation nurtures public *self*-image [his emphasis]” (p. 473). An implication of Mao’s work is the potential for the emulation of an ideal social identity to contribute positively to the building of a community or practice (referred to earlier). We explore this implication later in this paper.

### Asynchronous Discussion in the Context of Online Learning

Online learning is here to stay. Indeed, asynchronous discussion has its own, dedicated academic *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*. In a recent essay, Gary Natriello has produced a range of statistics to underline its burgeoning, fueled (as he argues) by a general growth in demand for education, especially among the young, in places such as the US and China, and perceived advantages in both online and distance learning. If the rhetoric is to be believed, online and distance learning is panacea, with unique advantages for “developing” nations. Let us quickly review some recent research which looks particularly at asynchronous discussion.

#### a) Duration, continuity and rates of participation

A number of researchers have explored the advantages and disadvantages for learning of synchronous (continuous) and asynchronous (continual) discussion. In slowing down students’ time for reflection, asynchronous discussion appears to foster a process of deep learning through acts of writing free from “the tyranny of the ever present ‘now’ of the face-to-face classroom” (Markel 2001, “Summary”, ¶1, see also, Lim & Tan 2001; Poole 2000).

Other research indicates that the equality of “speaking” time in computer-mediated discussion environments has fostered more equal participation and more idea generation. (Sorensen & Baylen 2004, p. 118) Recent research by Im and Lee (2004), involving 40 pre-service teacher education students, found female students to be more active than males in online discussions, suggesting that a “more egalitarian atmosphere” and “social distance”

<sup>2</sup> Considerations may also need to be posited on the assumption that besides ‘individual’ intelligence some kind of ‘collective’ intelligence is at work in an ABB. (see Lévy, 1997)

had lessened male dominance (2004, p. 166). However, they also found that the differences between genders was less in respect of initiating postings – males preferred to initiate postings than respond to the postings of others (2004, p. 162).

Im and Lee were also interested in changing patterns of interaction over time among their student participants, using for analytical purposes five categories of content (topic-related, learning-related, related to discussion management, related to social interaction, and technical management-related) and a model for staged development in an online learning community:

- a) S<sub>1</sub> Social bond formation (“the first stage of learning community development, where participants introduce themselves and get to know each other”);
- b) S<sub>2</sub> Information sharing (“where participants feel comfortable in exchanging and sharing knowledge and information”);
- c) S<sub>3</sub> Advanced stage (“where participants apply advanced metacognitive skills such as awareness, reflection, and evaluation”) (Im and Lee 2004, p. 158).

They found that while synchronous discussion was more useful in promoting social interaction, asynchronous discussion was more useful for task-oriented communication. While duration appeared to have little impact for synchronous discussion, it was clearly a factor for asynchronous discussion, with stage 2 postings (information exchange) decreasing over time and stage 3 postings (advanced stage) becoming more prevalent by the discussion outpoint. On the basis of this study, then, one can conclude that asynchronous discussion in an online setting is better able to facilitate and support learning for a greater range of students than synchronous discussion.

#### b) Feedback, convergence and structuration

Feedback, convergence and structuration all relate to patterns of interaction operating among the company present, really or virtually, in a rhetorical space. All are in differing ways problematic in the context of an ABB discussion. Immediate feedback is not available to ABB participants, nor is non-verbal feedback. (Emoticons can be thought of as quasi-non-verbal feedback.) In their brief literature review, Sorensen and Baylen note a leadership void and lack of structure as potential disadvantages of ABBs and relate these to difficulties in “consensus building”, (2004, p. 118) calling to mind Hammond’s (1997) view that much online debate is serendipitous and hard to structure.

In a recent, systematic review of 62 case-study papers dealing with the role of asynchronous online discussion in higher education, Hammond (2005) highlighted four interrelated issues as impacting on student learning: curriculum design, instructor support, learner’s behavior and attitudes and software. The first two of these are clearly related to feedback, convergence and structuration as we have defined them. (The third can be thought of as related to the overt company but impacting on feedback and structuration, while the fourth has a pervasive effect on reach and connection.)

Sorensen and Baylen’s (2004) study (referred to above) comparing patterns of communication of the same students from a “hybrid” class across face-to-face (FTT) and asynchronous online discussion settings is particularly pertinent to the dimension of feedback. They used five categories to code types of communication:

1. *Initiating*: for example, “stating an opinion or insight to get the conversation started”;
2. *Supporting*: for example, “sharing evidence to support a position”;
3. *Challenging*: for example, “offering different opinions”;
4. *Summarizing*: for example, “when a participant states in a concise way the essence of someone else’s remarks”;
5. *Monitoring*: for example, “statements that keep the group on task and focus the discussion on the topic” (2004, p.119).

The researchers used a further coding system for response levels, which they called the

*“Initiate-Response-Reply Framework (IRR)”, where responses were coded as an initial posting (IP), response to a post (RP), reply to a response (RR), or reply to a reply (RR#). Level 4 responses were deemed to be high, and Level 1 low, as indicators of interactions among participants (2004, p. 120).*

In respect of online discussion, Sorensen and Baylen found that patterns 1 and 2 (initiating and supporting) dominated. They also found more evidence for initial levels of response patterns.

*“Students were most likely to respond to an initial posting (level 2), and much less likely to reply to a response (level 3) and not likely at all to reply to a reply (level 4). Thus, the interactions appeared much less like a discussion, in which conversation builds upon previous responses, and more like a question-and-answer scenario” (2004, p. 124.)*

The authors draw a number of implications from their research:

- If metacognition is going to occur, students may need to learn and apply new communication patterns (such as challenging, summarizing and monitoring);
- There is a case to be made for designing online tasks that demand that students engage in both synthesizing and challenging;
- Use can be made of models or exemplars of expected online role behaviour, and these expected roles clearly defined and illustrated;
- It is best to choose topics that lend themselves to high-level patterns of communication and interaction;
- Instructors “...need to pay attention to instructional design principles that enhance the learning environment. The use of online discussion should allow learners to focus on key components of what they are learning. They must be able to connect what they know prior to this experience and to make those connections to what they are currently learning” (2004, p. 124-5).

In respect of Sorensen and Baylen’s research, we would note that their five categories – initiating, supporting,

challenging, summarizing, monitoring – are descriptions of speech acts. That is, they are concerned less with the propositional content of utterances than with their illocutionary force. One of these speech acts is “challenging”, a word that re-appears in the first two bullet-points above. One of the best practices identified by Hammond in his recent (2005) systematic review was encouraging critique and divergence, a variation on the theme of the challenge. And in yet another variation, Lim and Cheah, in a 2003 study, suggested on the basis of their findings that tutors might usefully play the role of “devil’s advocate” (p. 43-4) in discussion.

If, as this research suggests, active challenging is integral to successful learning in asynchronous, online discussion environments, then the role of politeness strategies in helping a group achieve convergence or tolerate divergence (by being congenial) is indeed worthy of attention.

### **A Small Case Study: Context, Procedures and Some Findings**

Both presenters work in the Arts and Language Education Department of the School of Education at Waikato University, New Zealand. In the mid-1980s this university actually owned all WWW access coming into New Zealand before selling it to Telecom (NZ) Ltd around 1996. Virtually all of the core teacher-education courses within the School of Education have distance-learning options, while a large number of Masters papers have online options or are online only.

The online learning platform Waikato’s distance-learning students use is called Class Forum. It is powered by PLACE, a customized version of the American engine Web Crossing. As is true of any ABB interface in educational institutions like ours, power is not evenly distributed between teachers and students in respect of control of access (differential power is an important issue which is outside the brief of this paper.) As one might expect, aspects of user interface design affect the textual potentials of different users. Figure 1 (Appendix 1) shows the message box that an ABB participant uses in Class Forum. The “language” of the message box is hypertext. In broad terms, there are two ways of writing a message.

1. Composing *in* the box, making use of the emoticons below and the textual affordances symbolized by the second row of symbols.
2. Composing in a web-authoring programme such as Dreamweaver and then pasting in the box the html related to the body (only) of the message.

The html *potential* of the message box is the same as for a webpage, apart from an approximate 30k size limit. (The size limit for attachments is 2 megabytes.) That is, the message box has the multi-modal potential of a webpage, though students are limited in their power to exploit this potential.

In this case study, we collected questionnaire, interview and ABB transcript data from students enrolled in a totally online Masters course on “English Language and Literacy: Issues and Tensions” in Semester A, 2005. While we call it a case study, there is an action research aspect to this study, in that one of us coordinated and lectured in this

course. The following statement from McNiff (2002) is apposite: “Action research is an enquiry by the self into the self, undertaken in company with others acting as research participants and critical learning partners” (p. 15).

The course consisted of seven modules, two of which were core; students were required to choose three modules from the remaining optional list of five. For each module, students were provided with a book of readings, and online “lecture” or “commentary” material. For each module studied, there were four Class Forum ABB discussions; as part of their assessment students were marked for their participation. Three lecturers taught the course. Ethical approval was obtained for the study and appropriate permissions were obtained from participants related to data usage. For this paper, we have focused on questionnaire data, transcripts from three introductory discussions and transcripts from four discussion episodes related to the second course module (which was entitled “Reality, discourse and the construction of English”).

The class had five students, 27.8 years of age on average, and consisted of three Chinese students (overseas students enrolled at Waikato) and two European (or Pakeha) New Zealanders. Four out of five students had previously participated in mostly or entirely delivered online, tertiary courses. In a confidence survey administered at the start of the course, all students had some confidence in functions such as emailing, using search engines and participating in bulletin-board discussions. Most, however, indicated a lack of confidence in initiating and hosting bulletin-board discussions.

By a number of measures, we deem this course to have been very successful. We have been curious to ask why? For instance, all five students gained a grade of A or above for the course. In a confidential paper appraisal administered by the university’s Teaching and Learning Development Unit, students gave a rating of 1.0 for their “Overall satisfaction with quality of paper”. (On this scale, 1 is highest and 5 is lowest.)

Although this was a small group of student, their questionnaire responses were consonant with other research findings (see last section) linking asynchronous discussion with liberation in various ways from the tyranny of time. Four out of five students indicated that they found it easier to express their views in an online discussion than in a face-to-face, classroom situation. In particular, all three of the Chinese students took this position. One Chinese student commented: “In the Class Forum, non-native English speakers can express themselves better than face-to-face learning because online learning give them time to properly put their ideas into English.” Another said: “Online discussion provided a relaxed atmosphere to express my views. Especially, I can have enough time to make my views mature before I post it.” For most of these students, then, the nature of the medium itself was an incentive to participate.

We mentioned earlier that student participation in discussion was assessed in this course. That it itself has to be factored in as an incentive to participate. However, the guidelines for students suggested that reasonable contribution, especially for NESB students, was two messages per discussion. Across the

seven transcripts analysed for this paper, the mean number of contributions for the five students ranged from 3.71 to 7.14. (The number for the lecturer was 8. Clearly there is a relationship between the lecturer's rate and quality of participation that is beyond the scope of this paper.) The relative participation rate indicates a participant's contribution relative to other participants. An analysis of the relative participation rates of the five students across all seven transcripts shows the extent to which they shared responsibility for conducting the discussion. The rates were (in ascending order): 8.19%, 13.17%, 14.22%, 14.84% and 20.72% (the lecturer's was 25.27%). In might be noted that the Chinese student who had a rate of 8.19% across all seven transcripts, had a rate of 12.19% across the four discussions in Module 4, indicating that her confidence in contributing had increased over time.

All students in this course agreed that participation in the Class Forum helped them understand the content of the course, exposed them to a large range of opinions about course content, helped them clarify their ideas about topics and helped them develop ideas later used in written assignments. As we have argued, the nature of the medium itself is a spur to participation; and so, potentially, is the fact that student contribution was assessed. But this multicultural group of students were participating at a rate considerably higher than the minimum requirement. What other factors might have been operating?

Feedback, as a feature of discussion, can be viewed as both an aspect of connection in its own right and as contributing to what we call structuration – the way in which a string of utterances achieves and manifests coherence. As indicated earlier, feedback spread is the percentage of all other discussion participants a given participant offers unsolicited feedback to. A feedback spread of 50 indicates that over the course of a discussion a participant has offered feedback to half of the other participants. The percentages quoted here apply to the four discussions related to Module 2. The feedback spread for the five students ranged was: 50, 75, 85, 95 and 95 (for the lecturer it was 100). The point might be made that such a spread might be expected from such a small number of participants. A different sort of indicator is feedback rate – the total number of feedback instances a participant produces as a percentage of his or her total number of discussion utterances. The feedback rate for the class was: 118.75, 168.75, 169.25, 198.25 and 280 (the latter belonging to a Chinese student we will call Zhongyu). The lecturer's rate was 119.00. While we concede that this is a crude measure, it does indicate that all of the students (and the lecturer), across four asynchronous discussions averaging 36.25 utterances, frequently incorporated multiple feedback instances in single utterances. The high feedback rate, we argue, equates with a high degree of responsiveness in all participants. And this, we suggest, is a third factor operating to ensure the success of these discussions.

However, such a conclusion begs the question: How was this responsiveness articulated? What productive relational work was being done by the language the participants were using? To couch this question in pragmatic terms, what sorts of speech acts were occurring to ensure to support the achievement of convergence and achieve what we term

congeniality? Discourse analysis, utilizing politeness theory, is one way of addressing such questions.

As mentioned earlier, the particular ABB context being described and discussed in this paper brought together people who mostly did not know each other and from a wide range of backgrounds. For course participants there was a need early on to develop relationships and to gain confidence communicating in a new context which (apart from emoticons) was devoid of non-verbal avenues of communication, usually rich sources of information for forming relationships. While the questions posed in the introductory three episodes of this course were aimed at getting students to think about issues relevant to the course, they were also an opportunity for the conventions of a newly formed community of practice to be established.

Positive face relate to a person's need to be approved of and liked by other people. It seems quite reasonable to expect that, especially during the initial introductory exercises conducted by the participants in the ABB, there will be frequent attendance to positive face in order to compensate for the near lack of non-verbal communication and the need to establish a learning space in which participants will feel comfortable. An analysis of the 74 exchanges which occurred in these introductory discussions demonstrated some interesting, if not surprising, trends in terms of the positive politeness strategies used by participants. These included:

- the use of in-group address forms;
- the intensification of interest in another;
- the assertion of common ground.

Let us briefly illustrate each of these in turn.

One positive politeness strategy, which attends to a person's need for approval and friendship, is the use of in-group address forms (Paltridge 2000). In Discussion One several participants offered shortenings of their name to be used by others, and quite often adopted another positive politeness strategy by offering an explanation for their shortened name. For example, "My name is Catherine. However a little cumbersome to type, so please call me Cathy." Or, "I'm Yao Zhongyu (you may just call me Mike, if you like) from China." [Pseudonyms are being used for these and other examples.] A little later, Mike writes: "btw Please call me Mike. It's much easier for you to type in and remember, isn't it?" By offering the use of a shortened name or name which the participant may believe is easier for classmates to use, group members are offering a kind of code to indicate familiarity and friendship.

Frequent use was also made of inclusive group terms. Referring to one another in this way can be seen as contributing to a group defining itself, creating a sense of an identity and making sure that all members feel welcome. However, as Table 1 (Appendix 2) shows, there is a difference between Chinese and New Zealand pakeha participants in respect of group term usage. When the latter do use such terms, they tend to be neutral terms for a collective ("all", "everyone"). Only Catherine uses the term "team", which acts to position other participants to think of themselves as members of a group working collegially to achieve a common goal or

purpose. Two Chinese students use this term and others, such as “group members”, “classmates”, “fellows”, “team members” and “colleagues”, which serve a similar purpose. In addition, Zhongyu uses first-person possessives to mark his sense of investment in group solidarity, while both he and Ying use the intensive modifier “dear” to bestow esteem on fellow course members. What we see operating here are distinctive aspects of Chinese politeness practice – firstly, evidence of an orientation to ideal social identity (Mao 1994) and, secondly, the notion of respectfulness which functions to elevate the other (Gu 1990).

Another striking feature of positive politeness which can be observed during the first three discussions in the life of this emerging community of practice is the frequent use of phrases which effectively intensify the current participant’s interest in previous participants’ contributions. Examples include:

- I am really interested in how you handle these problems in your teaching. (Ying)
- It’s really nice to read your contributions. (Zhongyu)
- Your experience sounds incredible. It’s the sort of thing we all dream of doing, but I imagine it would have been a pretty rocky road. (Angela)

This positive politeness strategy is one frequently used by the staff member guiding the discussion. His postings often make comments addressed to each of the authors of previous postings, and nearly always start with a comment showing interest in each of the student participant’s contributions.

- Hi Lili, welcome aboard. Thank you for your clear, well written account of the Chinese system. I’m learning a lot about your system...
- Ying, I think your comment about less rather than more is absolutely brilliant...”

This clear indication of interest in what others in the group have to say is important in the development of a sense of group and in the creation of a space in which participants feel encouraged and supported to give their opinions or ask their questions.

Another positive politeness strategy used by the staff member participant primarily responsible for discussion in the first three discussions is the assertion of common ground, which usually comes alongside a comment intensifying interest. Such a strategy clearly has a role to play in achieving what we have earlier termed “convergence”.

- Angela, well we’re on the same wavelength re NCEA...
- Ying, I think your comment about less rather than more is absolutely brilliant. I couldn’t agree more with you...

Another staff participant (Robert) visiting the discussion also makes use of this strategy:

- yes, culture’s a tricky one isn’t it? And you’re right Angela, it’s not the same as ethnicity...

Student participants in the ABB discussion also use this positive politeness strategy.

- Nikki, I too share your concern of the power text books could weld [sic]. (Catherine)
- Mike, I agree with you, to make well loved teachers in classroom, the teacher training should take some responsibility. (Ming)
- It seems all of us are aware that English teaching.... (Zhongyu)

In summary, several positive politeness strategies are in use during the introductory three episodes of this ABB, and they all reflect the need to create a “safe” environment in which students’ comments will be appreciated and accepted, and to create a sense of the group or community. All of these participants have brought to the discussion a range of politeness strategies which operate to produce a community of practice where convergence and divergence can be managed, congeniality achieved and productive learning occur.

Before concluding this section, however, we return to the question of Chinese politeness practices to draw attention to ways certain speech acts were handled in the seven transcripts. Gu (1990) has the following to say about the Chinese politeness principle:

*The PP can be understood as a sanctioned belief that an individual’s social behaviour ought to live up to the expectations of respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth and refinement (p. 245).*

On the basis of this conceptualization, Gu (1985) developed seven politeness maxims, including the Self-denigration Maxim, the Address Maxim, the Tact Maxim and the Generosity Maxim. The discussion of group terms above can be linked to the Address Maxim, which reads: “address your interlocutor with an appropriate address term. This maxim is based on the notions of respectfulness and attitudinal warmth” (Gu 1990, p. 248).

According to Gu (1990), the Self-denigration Maxim consists of two submaxims: “(a) denigrate self and (b) elevate other. This maxim absorbs the notions of respectfulness and modesty” (p. 246). In the transcripts analysed, one can see these notions operating in the articulations by Chinese participants of such speech acts as expressing agreement, recommending, responding to a challenge, expressing disagreement, seeking and responding to clarification, responding to correction and responding to disagreement. We offer two examples:

1. *Expressing disagreement:* Here is the beginning of a message from Ming during the second discussion in Module 2:

*“Hi Angela, your points did give me a lot of thinking. When we are talking about critical reading, we mean use your own logic and knowledge to judge when you are reading. Judged from different perspective, readings can be quite different to readers. In this way, ‘all discourses are just representations which fit with certain perspectives’. However, instead of saying ‘there is no “truth” at all’, I would like to say the truth only lies in yourself. This means the reader should trust his / her own judgment and try to defend it when it is challenged.” We note two features in Ming’s utterance. Firstly, he elevates Angela by*

noting that he has benefited from her message. Secondly, he softens his disagreement with her by the use of the modal verb “would like to say”.

2. *Responding to a challenge*: Five messages in to the first discussion of Module 2, Angela challenges Zhongyu:

*“Therefore, Mike, I think we have to do more than ‘analyse the writer’s writing purposes’ and try to discover the writer’s (and our own) assumed positions.” Ten messages later, Zhongyu responds to her: “Angela, thank you for your sharing such a lot of brilliant ideas! I agree with you, “If [students] were made more aware of the origin of these various discourses and selves (through critical awareness) they would be better able to make choices about who they are”. Again, we find Zhongyu elevating Angela by positioning her as a “sharing” person who has “brilliant” ideas. In addition, he positions himself as someone who has taken her ideas on board by quoting direction from a message she had sent earlier in the day.*

These examples typify the range of transactions involving Chinese students in the course which appear to show Gu’s Self-denigration Maxim in action. On the basis of our interview data from the two New Zealand students in the course, it is clear to us that Chinese politeness practices contributed to learning because they facilitated congeniality and allowed for divergence by virtue of the habitual way various Chinese articulations addressed (and even pampered!) the more “Western” negative face needs of the New Zealand students. Before concluding this paper, let us share with you some comments from the two New Zealand students in this course.

*Angela: In general, I found the Chinese students to be much more polite than their NZ counterparts. I found the Chinese participants to be decidedly non-argumentative. If a Chinese student raised a point and another student disagreed with them, they would invariably acquiesce and sometimes go as far as being apologetic for their own line of thinking. If another student raised a point the Chinese student would generally applaud that line of thinking without any disagreement....My response to this was twofold. On the one hand, I too made an effort to be more polite, to applaud the ideas of others and when disagreeing to do so gently. On the other hand, I found myself becoming more argumentative than I might otherwise have been! I felt the need to provoke a candid reaction from the Chinese participants. In short, I started to pick fights (politely)!!*

*Catherine: [Chinese students] usually “spoke” to other members on the course with the utmost courtesy, respect and even affection at times, e.g. “My dear colleagues” (or similar), most unlike the casual, or even academic discourse of most NZers...I certainly found myself warming to them and wanting to return the same courtesies.*

## Conclusion

In his recent synthesis, Hammond states that

*“Researchers express broad agreement that the argument for using asynchronous online discussion rests in a commitment to interaction between learners and adherence to a social constructivist approach to teaching and learning’ focusing on the value of social interaction and learner involvement in active meaning-making” (2005, p. 18).*

He puts emphasis on the qualities of participating learners, surely a critical feature of any overt company. In his consensus

of best practices, he includes among these qualities: an appreciation of the benefits of group work; ICT competence and access; a willingness to critique authority; text-based communication as a preferred learning style; a willingness to interact publicly both constructively and critically and some fluency and proficiency in the language of the forum (2005, pp. 18-9). Many of the papers analysed are critiqued for their failure to “critically address the responsibility of learners to participate, the characteristics of the learners to whom online discussion would most or last appeal” (2005, p. 20).

We have no doubt that the composition of the student portion of the overt company was a major factor in the success of the course we have discussed here. Four out of five of the students described themselves as very confident or reasonably confident in participating in an ABB discussion. The fifth student expressed a learning-style preference for FTF discussion, but still described herself as having some confidence in ABB discussion participation. Even more salient, however, four of the five students had previously participated in a tertiary education courses taught entirely online, and three out of five had additionally participated in courses taught in part online. The Chinese students had all participated in an online Masters course (at Waikato) on “eEducation Research and Development”.<sup>3</sup> In the main, then, these students were primed and ready to go.

In addition we have identified and discussed other factors that have contributed to successful learning. the first of these has been the nature of the ABB interface itself, especially its affordance of continual discussion and ways this favours students for whom the language of instruction is not their first language.

A second factor was the fact that student participation was assessed. The place of assessment and its relationship to participation rates is an issue that warrants future research. The studies Hammond reports on offered conflicting views, sometimes favoring summative assessment, sometimes suggesting that summative assessment had the potential to increase the number of postings without improving their quality (2005, p. 16). One Chinese student, Ying, delicately expressed her opinion thus: “Online discussion did motivate me to engage with the content of a course, especially when I was lazy or tired of study. I believe an appropriate pressure is helpful to study.”

A third factor was the spread and rate of feedback. The group studied was highly responsive in respect of feedback, and feedback clearly played a role in achieving convergence and managing divergence. There are clearly implications here for teachers offering online instruction using asynchronous discussion. Feedback behaviour can be modeled, taught and illustrated by the provision of models in a course’s discussion guidelines.

The fourth factor we have identified and discussed here has been politeness. It has been interesting for us to have identified and discussed the ways Chinese politeness practices interacted with Kiwi (New Zealand) politeness

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<sup>3</sup> One commented: ‘It was the first course I studied via Internet and one of my favorite papers.’

practices in this course. As New Zealanders ourselves, we would not want to suggest that we are a nation of barbarians! However, the two New Zealand students in this course viewed themselves as having been taught a lesson by the students from China. For the most part, we conclude, the Chinese politeness practices were “contagious” and became a kind of lubricant for the discussion which occurred and the learning which resulted from it. In particular, Chinese politeness practices were particularly helpful in the managing of potentially face-threatening speech acts such as challenging and disagreeing.

Finally, let us mention some relevant ethical considerations that need to be borne in mind in the development of future research agendas, keeping in mind that all teaching is an ethical undertaking and that there is always an ethical dimension to the educational philosophy one subscribes to. In respect of ABBs in particular, there are issues on the macro level related to surveillance – the covert company I have discussed previously. There are also ethical issues on the micro level, related to how members of the overt company manage their interactive behaviour and how course designers and teachers assign, construct and reward specific roles and behaviours. When courses attract culturally diverse participants, issues of cultural sensitivity, in respect of behaviour and design, have to be faced up to. We would like to give one of the students, Angela, the last word for this paper, since it indicates an ethical ideal that is realizable in the rhetorical space opened up by web-based ABBs: “In online discussion, I feel that each student has far more control over the discussion. Anyone can ask a question or raise a new issue, and there is always time to discuss everyone’s ideas. In f2f, either the lecturer or a handful of students tend to dominate discussion, and you tend to run out of time.”

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Terry Locke ir Nicola Daly

## Mandagumas ir įžūlumas kompiuterizuotoje e-mokymosi erdvėje

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje keliamos dvi pagrindinės problemos. Pirmoji problema yra teorijos kūrimas apie tai, kaip yra keičiama „retorinė erdvė“ asinchroninėje internetinėje mokymosi aplinkoje. Ypač asinchroninė diskusija e-mokymosi erdvėje suteikia galimybes ir apriboja mokymą ir mokymąsi. Mokymosi procesą itakoja prieinamumas, būdingas pokalbio erdvei ir bendravimo praktika, kurioje dalyvauja tiek mokytojai, tiek studentai. Antroji iškelta problema

yra socialinis tyrimas, kuriame panaudotos veiklos tyrimo ir diskurso analitinės strategijos. Šiame tyrime dalyvavo autorius ir studentai, kurie mokėsi kompiuterizuotoje aplinkoje, kur diplomuotų specialistų kursams buvo naudojami asinchroniniai pokalbiai. Anglų kalba dėstomo kurso klausė mišri kinų studentų (kuriems anglų kalba buvo antroji kalba) ir vietinių anglų grupė. Straipsnyje atskleidžiama studentų nuomonė apie tai, kas jiems patiko ir kas nepatiko e-mokymo / mokymosi aplinkoje. Taip pat straipsnyje naudojamos sąvokos (mandagumas, įžūlumas) parodo galimybę analizuoti dalyvių komunikatyvinės praktikos aspektus, įgalinančius daryti išvadas apie tai, koks gali būti mokymasis e-mokymosi erdvėje, kai dalyvauja įvairių kultūrų ir skirtingomis kalbomis kalbantys studentai. Straipsnyje palyginami šio socialinio tyrimo ir kitų asinchroninio internetinio mokymo tyrimų rezultatai ir pateikiami pasiūlymai tolimesniems tyrimams.

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Readers of this paper can download an edited sample transcript from the course discussed in this paper from [http://edlinked.soe.waikato.ac.nz/staff/index.php?user=loketj&page\\_id=5295](http://edlinked.soe.waikato.ac.nz/staff/index.php?user=loketj&page_id=5295).

## APPENDIXES

### APPENDIX 1

To post a message, compose your text in the box below, then click on **Post my Message** (below) to send the message.

**Message:**

**Click to add:**

**H**   **B**   *↗*   ↶ ↷   ↵   ➤ ➥   —         @   URL   ?

**Attachments:**

☐ **Subscribe to this discussion by email**

**Figure 1:** Class Forum message box

### APPENDIX 2

**Table 1:** Introductory discussion: Group terms used

Group terms	Chinese nationals				New Zealand pakeha (Europeans)			
	Zhongyu	Ming	Ying	Lili	Angela	Catherine	Terry	Robert
dear group members			1					
my (dear) classmates	1							
dear teachers and fellows	1							
team members	1							
my / our colleagues	4							
team	1			1		1		
all		1			1			
everyone					1			

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