Australian Journal of Adult Learning
Volume 55, Number 1, April 2015

The quest for authenticity: A study of an online discussion forum and the needs of adult learners

Jenny McDougall
Central Queensland University

The objective of achieving a sense of 'authenticity' in an educational context is one that might have immediate appeal, though how this is defined, let alone achieved, remains contested. The concept of 'authentic discussion' has traditionally been used in the context of classroom English teaching in schools, but this paper explores its possible application to an online discussion forum at university. Participants in this forum were students in a program designed to prepare adult learners for higher education. Though communication in an online environment differs from face-to-face dialogue, it was found not to be a barrier to 'authenticity' in some respects. Multiple perspectives were evident with students building on the ideas of each other, but also being prepared to disagree. The level of support and respect was such that they were willing to tackle sensitive issues, and share in an honest and sometimes revealing way. The role of the lecturer emerged as a critical component in achieving such outcomes. Though claims of 'authenticity' are always difficult to substantiate, this study concludes that elements of an 'authentic discussion' can be achieved in an online environment

and this objective has a particular salience in the context of adult learning.

Keywords: *authentic discussion; adult learning; online learning; critical thinking; enabling education*

Introduction

The notion of 'authenticity' in an educational context has been applied in a variety of ways but the implication is generally that this kind of learning is more meaningful and incisive, that somehow the learning outcomes have more real-life significance, in comparison to more traditional learning experiences. The literature about 'authentic discussion' has focussed almost exclusively on the context of classroom English teaching. The focus of this study is to establish the ways in which the characteristics of an 'authentic discussion' might apply to adults, rather than school-age children, and to an online environment, rather than a classroom context. The paper begins with an exploration of the concept of 'authenticity' and its connections to the principles of adult learning. According to the interpretation of Hadjioannou (2007), the concept of 'authentic discussion' is an exchange where multiple viewpoints are openly expressed in a way that leads to new understandings and co-constructed forms of knowledge. A study of a discussion forum on the topic of 'family' is used to illustrate to the possibilities for authentic discussion in the online environment. The participants in this forum were students enrolled in an enabling program, that is, one designed to prepare adult learners for higher education. The study revealed a number of features that correlate with those of an 'authentic discussion', including an acceptance of multiple perspectives, a climate of respect and support, and a preparedness to take risks. These findings are then discussed in terms of their likely implications for educators of adult learners and opportunities for future research in online learning.

Authenticity and the needs of adult learners

The concept of 'authenticity' has recently emerged in a number of contexts in the field of education. According to Reeves, Herrington and Oliver (2002), an interest in "authentic activities" requires more

work than the development of more traditional forms of content-based instruction, but can result in improved learning outcomes. Newmann and Wehlage (1993) describe authentic instruction as "significant and meaningful", as opposed to "trivial and useless". They advocate that students have the opportunity to experience learning tasks with real-world connections. In a similar vein, Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson and Soler (2000) talk about authenticity in terms of literacy activities that have real-world connections, while Herrington and Oliver (2000: 23) advocate "authentic learning environments" that close the gap between "formal school learning and real-life learning". "Authentic tasks" are associated with high levels of engagement and positive learning outcomes (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). "Authentic assessment" encourages a more proactive approach to learning and is designed to equip students with skills needed for their future rather than for simply passing subjects to gain a qualification (Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2004). Clearly, the concept of authenticity is a seductive one in educational terms; it denotes the possibility of meaningful, challenging and proactive learning experiences, as opposed to learning which is shallow and passive. There is the implication that such learning experiences will have relevance to real-world situations and can benefit the individual in their 'real' life and not just the context of a formal education.

In view of these connotations, the concept of authenticity might seem to have direct relevance to the needs of adult learners. In Knowles's andragogical model (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998), one of the most widely used models of adult learning, there are a number of defining characteristics that resonate with the idea of 'authenticity'. According to this model, adults are perceived to be more genuine in their levels of autonomy: they are more self-directing in nature, and more likely to feel responsible for their own learning. Equally, their motivation may be described as more 'authentic' in that they tend to be intrinsically motivated, and therefore prefer to be given a sense of choice in their learning. The desire for authenticity may also be observed in their need to feel that the prior experience and knowledge they bring to the learning environment are recognised and valued. Further, adults become ready to learn when life circumstances lead them to this point, and they need to see that knowledge and skills have immediate application and relevance to a real-life context.

Although the andragogical model has been criticised for its lack of consideration to how the learner is socially and historically situated (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Pratt, 1993), there is much research in this field that also draws on social constructivist principles and stresses the significance of social conditions in adult learning. According to Pratt (1993: 19), "andragogical approaches require a psychological climate of mutual respect, collaboration, trust, support, openness, authenticity, pleasure, and humane treatment". The teacher's role becomes one of facilitator, rather than authority and control. Apart from the all-important relationship between teacher and student, an atmosphere of mutual respect amongst all participants is widely advocated. Thus, learning is construed as a social activity, and adult learners, like school-age learners, are believed to learn best when they work collaboratively with others in a supportive environment. Wang, Sierra and Folger (2003) argue that maintaining a sense of community, by encouraging collaborative forms of learning, is an essential part of achieving positive learning outcomes for adult learners. With much university study being offered online in recent years, considerable attention is now given to how online activities can allow for maximum student participation and social interaction (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012; Rovai, 2002). Communication tools such as online discussion boards have served a pivotal function in this transition (Skinner & Derounian, 2008).

The needs of STEPS students

The principles of adult learning, including the need for a positive, supportive learning environment, underpin many aspects of Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS), an enabling program, which has been operating since 1986 at CQUniversity in Queensland, Australia. The program, which can be taken full-time or part-time, aims to provide adult learners with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for success at university. At the time when this study was undertaken, students completed subjects in the following four areas: academic writing, mathematics, computing, and general study skills. Many STEPS students have experienced disadvantage–whether it be a low socio-economic background, difficult personal circumstances, and/or negative experiences of formal education–and will be the first from their immediate families to study at university. Therefore, considerable attention is given to ensuring that tasks are appropriately scaffolded and

that adequate amounts of teacher support are provided, but with the overarching aim that students develop self-confidence and autonomy. Much of the STEPS philosophy reflects a holistic approach which acknowledges the social and emotional needs of students, as well as their academic needs. Therefore, when the STEPS program was offered in distance mode in 2006, considerable attention was given to the ways in which a supportive community and positive learning environment could be established in order to ensure that the STEPS ethos would not be compromised (Danaher, McDougall, Sturgess & Todorovic, 2008). Online discussions were considered an important vehicle for distance students to support each other and share their ideas.

The concept of 'authentic discussion'

In order to establish the authenticity or otherwise of discussion in such online forums, it is firstly necessary to define what is meant by this concept. Though there are likely to be widely ranging interpretations of 'authentic discussion', the concept seems to have direct links to the principles of constructivism, whereby the individual's engagement with new ideas is based on their prior knowledge and beliefs, rather than the result of transmitting knowledge from one to another (Richardson, 2005). Arising from such a learner-centred view of education, the objective of ensuring 'authenticity' in discussion has traditionally been used in the context of English teaching in schools, and, in particular, to the discussion of literary texts. McCann (2003) refers to meaningful and analytical discussion about literature as being symptomatic of 'authentic discussion', while Johannessen (2003) emphasises the importance of engaging students in discussion that requires critical thinking and analysis. Calfee, Dunlap and Wat (1994: 546) propose that authentic academic discussions should be characterised by metadiscourse, or "talk about talk". According to Briggs and Tang (2003), teaching contexts are responsible for the deep or superficial learning that arises from class discussions. Teachers can create messages that enhance deep learning by operating on a basis of freedom and choice. It is a matter of "balancing trust, risk and value" (Briggs & Tang, 2003: 65). The more autonomy students are given in discussions, the bigger the risks, but the greater the chance of authentic dialogue.

For the purposes of this paper, the concept of 'authentic discussion' is

framed by Hadjioannou (2007: 370) who defined such communication as a "dialogically oriented classroom interactions where participants present and consider multiple perspectives and often use others' input in constructing their contributions". Because it is a speech genre that operates within a particular community, it seems useful to study the characteristics of that environment in order to understand how patterns of dialogue evolve (Hadjioannou, 2007: 370). Though Hadjioannou (2007) concedes there is no easy way of describing a discourse community, she has identified a number of norms that characterise a particular social group engaging in authentic discussion. First and foremost, in order to be considered 'authentic', it is essential that understandings are co-constructed rather than simply transmitted from one person to another. Participants in the discussion listen attentively to others and build on the ideas offered by each other. Therefore, the scholarly authority of the teacher is not pivotal to learning. Rather than the teacher steering the discussion towards a pre-determined outcome, there is an emergence of new and/or multiple understandings based on shared viewpoints. Along with a more equal relationship between teacher and student, a more proactive style of learning is implied. Hadjioannou (2007) claims that a classroom that encourages such discussion is one in which all class members are invited to participate. Students raise issues they are interested in, rather than relying on the teacher to initiate topics for discussion. They are also able to make connections between classroom learning and out-of-classroom experiences, often relating the curriculum context to their personal lives.

'Authentic discussions' are characterised by positive social interaction whereby participants acknowledge the contributions of others, complimenting others on their contributions, and assisting others to clarify their ideas. Such consideration may be considered necessary in view of the potentially "socially perilous" nature of the opinions expressed (Hadjioannou, 2007: 393). It seems that students are more likely to initiate topics, share real-life experiences, or challenge each other if they are working in an atmosphere of trust. The participant may otherwise be considered vulnerable because of the more contentious nature of views expressed. The use of positive humour also assists in providing this climate of mutual respect. Humour that is relevant, respectful and well-meaning can help to "build and maintain a sense of community and probably [play] an important role in rendering

the classroom environment a safe place for authentic discussion" (Hadjioannou, 2007: 393).

In her study of fifth graders in Florida, Hadjioannou (2007) was careful to avoid claims of generalisability, though she did express a hope that her findings might be adopted by others. Certainly, in the list of norms that she identifies, a starting point for comparison presents itself. If opportunities to engage in authentic discussion lead to deeper understandings of topics and a sense of autonomy, as argued by Hadjioannou (2007) and others, then perhaps this kind of activity is something from which adult learners can also benefit, particularly in light of the perception that mature-aged learners are more self-directed than their younger counterparts. These considerations also have potential application to online teaching and learning environments. Therefore, the research question posed by this paper is: How might the concept of 'authentic discussion' be applied to a group of adult learners in the context of an online discussion forum at university?

The research at hand

This article reports on a larger study, the purpose of which was to explore the role of online discussion forums in the learning journey of distance students enrolled in STEPS, a program designed to prepare mature-aged learners for higher education. The data comprised of postings at the online discussion forums used in each of their four courses. The learning management system Blackboard provided asynchronistic discussion boards that allowed students to post and read messages, as well as to respond to any student or teacher involved in the target course. Participation in these online discussions was encouraged but not mandatory. No additional activity was requested of the participants in this study, beyond giving permission for their discussion forum postings to be analysed. Students were given assurances that they would not be identified in any way and that their participation would not affect their overall grades, as the study would take place after these had been finalised. Of the 285 students enrolled, 50 gave their permission.

For the purposes of this paper, a particular discussion board within the Language and Learning subject will be analysed. Being a subject that introduced students to the conventions of academic writing and research, there was considerable emphasis on critical thinking and

discussion. Students were asked to reflect on their personal learning journey, and to consider how they make meaning of their world. Participation in discussion was encouraged, whether face-to-face or online, on the assumption that "the best learning often occurs when we share experiences, ideas and feelings" (CQUniversity, 2009). As a stimulus for thinking, writing and discussing, students were introduced to a range of contemporary topics. One of these was the changing nature of family and family values in Australian society today. Students read newspaper and magazine articles, and also studied models of academic writing on this topic. They were then invited to participate in an online discussion on the topic of "family", based on their reactions to their readings and activities in this module.

There was a total of 304 postings to the "family" forum, some of these being multiple postings by the same students. Over 100 of these were posted by the lecturer in charge of the course (Helen). Of the 113 students who posted, 37 of these gave permission for their messages to be used for the purposes of this study. At the end of the term, the texts from these postings were extracted, verbatim, from the discussion board and encoded to remove identifying information. Pseudonyms were used to protect students' anonymity. When choosing quotes to illustrate the key points in this paper, there was consideration given to ensuring both male and female voices were represented, but the emphasis was on foregrounding the range of perspectives and backgrounds represented rather than demographic differences.

In accordance with the tenets of qualitative research, an organisational structure was constructed in order to explain the event under study (LeCompte, 2000). Rather than simply generating themes from the data, a theoretical lens was used to guide the analysis, in this case, the facets of 'authentic discussion' outlined by Hadjioannou (2007). In order to find common themes, the texts were coded using the analytical tool, NVivo. The processes of filing, cataloguing, labelling and tabling of data that characterise a qualitative method (LeCompte, 2000) are facilitated by use of this electronic tool. The initial coding resulted in several code categories: 'real-world connections', 'rapport', 'personal experiences', 'self-awareness', 'student initiative', 'risk-taking', 'student advice', 'disagreement', 'critique' and 'building on ideas of others'. Using a form of thematic analysis, the original list of descriptive codes were

reworked and refined to generate fewer, broader themes. According to Boyatzis (1998: 4) a theme is "a pattern found in the information that at minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon". Therefore, using this process enabled me to not only organise the data, but to make sense of and interpret the findings. Part of this analysis involved establishing the relationship between the themes, thus enabling me to understand the phenomenon under study: the characteristics of this discussion forum that reflect aspects of an authentic discussion. To this end, three broad, inter-related themes emerged, each directly related to the original concept of authentic discussion: 'acceptance of multiple perspectives'; 'climate of respect and support'; and 'preparedness to take risks'.

Acceptance of multiple perspectives

According to the literature, a discussion is considered more 'authentic' when participants demonstrate that they are really listening to each other and that they can appreciate the viewpoints of others. In reviewing the online postings at the discussion forum about "family", it became clear that a number of students were very interested in what others had to say, and acknowledged these perspectives before offering their own thoughts on the topic. Here is just one example of how a student demonstrates this kind of 'attentive listening':

> Ellen: *I agree with you Peter, we do have more choices these days, the choice to raise children in a healthy, loving environment. Thirty-five years ago I can remember as a small child that I begged my Mother to leave my Father, but it just wasn't the done thing. So we all just had to wear the abuse and violence and there was no such thing as counselling for the trauma back then, in fact it was all hidden behind closed doors… I would also like to point out that women also can be violent and abusive to not only their children but also to their partners. This is just as traumatising, I don't want people to think I am against men just because of my experiences, because we all know it goes both ways.*

In this response, Ellen empathises with Peter and the point he makes about having more choices in terms of raising a family. She also adds another layer to this discussion by gently pointing out that it is not just men who can be violent in relationships. This was typical of a number of

responses in which students initiated their own ideas, but in reaction to what others had said. In this way, the students built on the ideas of each other, thus becoming co-constructors of knowledge in a way that reflects the kind of authentic discussion described by Hadjioannou (2007).

It was also pleasing to note the way in which some students could acknowledge that there was more than one way to view an issue. In a forum examining "family", it is safe to assume that students would hold widely ranging views of what this means, and how this institution might have evolved. You could expect that this was a sensitive issue for some students and that it might be difficult to see things from a different perspective. One student clearly articulated her appreciation for the contrast between her upbringing and that of others in the group:

> Caroline*: Hi Justin, I enjoyed reading your story. I can't believe how many threads I am reading from [students] from broken families. It is quite humbling (if that's the right word?) I am blessed as I have come from a very 'intact' background. You are right, 'Home is where the Heart is' and don't forget you can't choose your (biological) family but you can choose your friends and make them your family just as you have done!*

This kind of critical, analytical thinking echoed the broader aims of the Language and Learning subject. In this subject, students were asked to reflect on their own values and were challenged to appreciate that there is more than one way to view any given issue or topic, via frameworks for thinking such as de Bono's Six Thinking Hats (1985). Such engagement was actively encouraged by Helen, the lecturer who monitored this discussion forum:

> *Hi Toni, and Philippa*
> *I enjoyed the thread of this discussion very much. Some great points and lots of thinking from multiple perspectives – all very necessary when we start writing academic essays.*
> *Thanks for your comments.*
> *Helen*

As alluded to in Helen's comments, the ability to see things from different perspectives was considered an important aspect of academic thinking and writing. In such exchanges the teacher can be more of a

facilitator of learning rather than the 'expert'.

In some cases, students openly disagreed with each other, though this was generally done in a respectful manner. In the following exchange, two students challenge the ideas of each other before another student draws their two positions together in a more 'middle-ground' response.

> Rita: *Jessie I would have to disagree with you on that one. Having grown up in a family where my mother stayed with my father for us children. It was a very difficult time for 18 years of my life and was a relief when they finally did get a divorce … Don't get me wrong I think we should all work at trying to keep the family unit together but it won't work if it's only for the children.*
>
> Jennie: *I think you have missed my point Rita. Obviously if the relationship is not a happy one, it would do more harm than good to the children involved to stay together. Many people give up when the going gets tough, and to have a successful relationship and family life, you need to work at it. I believe if people take the time and make the effort to work things through when they go wrong, there would be less broken families in the world. This does not apply to ALL people or situations, just some.*
>
> Lena: *Jennie and Rita,*
> *I can relate to what you are both saying. Things aren't always black and white and circumstances change. Speaking from personal experience.*
> *Regards Lena.*

It is interesting to note how meaning is co-constructed, with the first two students openly disagreeing and the third demonstrating empathy with both positions, being able to see the merit in what each has to say. Clearly, the issue of divorce and 'staying together for the sake of the children' is what Hadjioannou (2007: 393) might describe as a "socially perilous" topic. In view of the emotive nature of such a discussion, and the close personal significance for many of these students, the tone of this thread may be viewed as passionate at times, yet remained 'civil', even though students are coming at this with contrasting perspectives. Their preparedness to disagree openly with each other indicates their level of comfort in the collaborative space. Being free to pursue this

conversation without interjection or 'correction' from the lecturer would also seem to afford them a measure of autonomy.

Climate of respect and support

The positive way in which students acknowledged the contributions of others may be said to contribute to a respectful and supportive climate. Hadjioannou (2007) suggests that this spirit of cooperation and collaboration is a feature of environments that foster authentic discussion. Students commonly began their postings with "I agree . . ." and used the name of the person to whom their comment was directed. In some cases they built on what the other had said; in others, they clarified their own position in terms of what the other person had contributed. Students seem to be really 'listening' to each other, rather than simply presenting their own ideas, and in this way, their conversations seemed more natural, more 'authentic'.

In some cases, students were able to openly express empathy for each other, as demonstrated in the following response:

> Danny: *Hi Mick*
> *I feel for what you went through I find it amazing how people forget the marriage vows as soon as they are said and you may kiss the bride can be then followed by so much hurt and suffering*.

The student here is respectful and compassionate towards Mick, who had presumably shared a story about his marriage breakdown. A similar style of communication was demonstrated by the lecturer, Helen. With 104 postings at this forum, she clearly had a significant presence at the forum. In response to one student's reflection she wrote:

> *Wow. Can I start the same way you did? Well said Kent. Thank you for the insights you provided in this message. I'm sure many people are thinking deeply about what you had to say*.

Her tone was never one of authority or superiority; she seemed to come from a position of 'equality' while still providing encouragement and guidance. As Hadjioannou (2007) points out, the teacher's role is key in establishing the right kind of environment for authentic discussions to take place. In adopting a respectful and interested tone, Helen was

making students feel that their presence at the online discussion was valued; she was also modelling the kind of communication considered appropriate for this forum. It is interesting to note that at other times, students also took on this 'mentor' role by encouraging and supporting each other. Students commonly thanked each other for sharing their stories, for example, "I thought that was very touching and lovely to read, Thanks."

The use of friendly humour may be viewed as another way in which students connected with each other and a reflection of the level of trust experienced. According to Hadjioannou (2007: 387), this kind of playfulness is an important component of the classroom environment in that it "appeared to both reflect and help construct the amicable relationships among class members". It can also play an important role in rendering the environment a "safe place" for open discussion, particularly in view of the potentially perilous nature of the topics discussed (Hadjioannou 2007: 393). The following observation by Shelby is a good example of the kind of self-deprecating humour evident throughout this forum: "I feel a good male model will help girls look for more in a partner. Although it is a pity one of my daughters didn't follow her mothers beliefs, LOL."

Helen also modelled this light-hearted approach in some of her responses, for example, "Thank you both for your insightful comments. If women like you ran the country, we'd be in a great position!" As Hadjioannou (2007) points out, these points of lightness may be considered an important relief from the more sobering and intense aspects of the topics discussed. A tone of collegiality was apparent throughout the online discussion about "family", and there were many other examples of such good-natured banter within the data available. Although much of the discussion was serious in tone, the teacher and students could be playful with each other and also laugh at themselves.

Preparedness to take risks

Because students felt comfortable in this space, they were prepared to take risks in terms of the topics covered. Students shared surprisingly personal and poignant stories about their own real-life experiences, in these cases, their family backgrounds and beliefs about family relationships. Here is an example of a response in which a student talks

about his own dysfunctional family background:

> Mike: *Having grown up in a blended family I had an abusive Stepfather and an emotionally absent Mother. Mum stayed with this man because there was no choice. There was no help available for single women with four children, and in her mind we were better off staying with this man, who was physically and emotionally violent towards us, then we would have been on the street. She is now divorced and is all the better for it. The increase in blended families to me says that there are now more choices for men and women who are in that situation.*

The topic of domestic violence is clearly one that is emotion-laden, and yet here the student talks about this in a matter-of-fact way in order to validate his conclusion about the benefit of blended families. In a similar way, Maya shares her disappointment at her own rather unflattering history of relationship breakdowns, again a sensitive and highly personal topic:

> Maya: *i realy related to your post stacey, i also wanted a 'perfect family' after my experience of not having one growing up. however it didn't happen the 'right' way for me either. 3 kids later to two different dads (once my worst fear) here i am a sole mum, and while i wouldn't have chosen it this way, i'm pretty happy with my family.*
> *Like you have said so well, at the end of the day it's the love in your heart that really matters.*

Of course, there is always the danger that such openness could end up as an emotional outpouring rather than a considered and productive discussion about the topic at hand; equally this could happen in a face-to-face classroom discussion without careful monitoring. However, this was generally not the case at this discussion forum, and certainly not true of the postings under study. In Mike's response, the student uses his real-life experience to come to a conclusion about the benefits of changing family norms, while Maya determines that family is more about genuine relationships than conventional structures.

The role of the teacher again appears to be significant in this regard, and the need for a more equal relationship between student and teacher, as

advocated by theorists such as Knowles, Holton and Swanson (1998) is here endorsed. Helen's non-judgmental and empathetic tone helped to establish an atmosphere in which students felt safe enough to share their vulnerabilities:

> *How right you are! Your partner in life not only is your lover but also your best friend. Friendship is important; you need to like and admire your partner for the individual he or she is.*
> *Thanks for sharing.*
> *Helen*

Most of the personal stories shared at this forum were relevant to the topics under discussion, and did not degenerate into emotional diatribes, though it is possible that there were some reading these forums who would have been uncomfortable with the personal nature of some of the postings. For the most part, students were able to use their own, real-life experiences to illustrate the broader points that they wished to make. However, the fact that so many students revealed personal elements of themselves suggests they felt what they had to say was worthwhile and also says a lot about their sense of safety in this environment. The willingness of students to reveal so much of themselves is another key attribute of an 'authentic discussion' (Hadjioannou, 2007).

Findings and implications

In summing up the main findings from this study, certain limitations need to be made transparent. I am not suggesting, for example, that all students who contributed to the forum demonstrated the same level of commitment and openness as those featured in this paper, and it could be argued that the students who agreed to have their postings used in the study were already more engaged than most. While claims of generalisability are not the purpose of exploratory studies such as this, the findings presented here do offer important insights into how the concept of 'authenticity' can be applied to an online discussion forum at a university level. This study has shown that the principles of an 'authentic discussion' involving school-aged children can equally be applied to adult learners and that the online discussion forum would seem to provide a suitable space for such engagement. Mulitple

viewpoints were expressed, and students seemed to really listen to each other: they built on the ideas of others, sometimes challenging each other, as well as expressing their appreciation of, and empathy for, other viewpoints. The positive ways in which they responded to each other were symptomatic of a supportive and respectful environment. The lecturer, who also modelled this pattern of communication, assumed a role that was one of guidance rather than of authority and control. This climate of trust enabled students to take risks in what they talked about, exposing their vulnerabilities as they shared their personal experiences and beliefs about the topic of 'family'.

The concept of 'authentic discussion' might be seen as having particular resonance with adult learners because of assumptions made about the level of self-awareness they bring to their learning. In encouraging students to share their personal experiences, there is an acknowledgement of the knowledge and understandings they bring to their formal education and this is very much in keeping with the principles of adult learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). Further, when students compare their experiences and opinions with others and make connections with broader social issues, they are engaging in critical self-reflection. Theorists such as Cranton (2006) and Mezirow (1991) suggest that the opportunity for self-reflection is particularly suited to adult learners, possibly because of their broader sets of life experiences and capacity for introspection. Encouraging adults to share in this way can also be a potentially transformative experience, as students gain new insights into the worldviews of themselves and others (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 1991).

The potential for online learning to enable authentic discussion is another area of research that warrants further study. As higher education adapts to embrace the needs of a changing and more technologically driven world, there needs to be more exploration of the communication patterns in online learning spaces. That is not to suggest that the online environment must necessarily duplicate the conventions of face-to-face teaching, especially as the literature indicates that many classroom discussions fail to achieve anything other than superficial learning because they are so carefully scripted and directed by the teacher (Kennedy, 2005; Nystrand, 1997). Nor is it suggesting that an online environment can achieve the objective of authenticity any more

easily. The nature of asynchronistic discussion boards means that there might be much that can be considered contrived about the discussion under scrutiny, especially considering the disproportionately high number of contributions by the lecturer in this study. However, the online environment might well provide a more familiar and 'real-life' context for adults whose communication practices increasingly rely on social media. There is scope for more research into the conditions which can inspire online discussion of this type, and the kinds of topics that might foster this level of engagement.

The link between authentic discussions and community-building is also worthy of closer scrutiny. Certainly, the results from this study would seem to indicate that the need for adult learners to feel socially connected to others is one that can be met by participation in online forums. The equal relationship established between the students and the lecturer emerges as significant in encouraging this kind of participation. The atmosphere of collegiality evident in the discussion forum enabled students to be frank and open in what they were prepared to share, at times offering contributions that may be what Hadjioannou described as "socially perilous" (2007: 393). Again, the literature suggests that this feature of authenticity in these discussions is likely to resonate with adult learners who seek to establish equal relationships with the other members of their group, and to be active in their own learning. There is scope for further research into the qualities of lecturers suited to the task of establishing online learning environments conducive to such 'authentic discussion', as well as for their training in this regard.

Conclusion

'Authenticity' is a concept that has wide appeal in educational contexts because of its associations with meaningful learning and connections to 'real-life' experiences. This paper has explored the ways in which the concept of 'authentic discussion' may be applied to the context of online learning and the needs of adult learners. Taking the key elements of Hadjioannou's conceptual framework (2007), the focus of this study was an online forum which featured in an academic writing subject. The students, enrolled in a university preparatory program, seemed to engage in authentic discussion in that they appeared to really 'listen' to each other as they discussed the changing nature of the Australian

family: they could acknowledge multiple viewpoints, build on the ideas of each other, but also challenge each other if they did not agree. The respectful and attentive way in which participants responded to each other created a supportive learning environment. Empathy and compassion were evident in many of the postings under review, and the use of light-hearted banter also had a positive impact. The sense of comfort in this environment was such that students were able to take risks; they shared openly with each other, detailing highly personal and, at times, self-deprecating accounts of their real-life experiences. The role of the lecturer seemed crucial in constructing this sense of safety and support. Though there are clearly limitations to the flow of an online discussion in terms of spontaneity, there is scope for students to benefit in a range of ways, including opportunities to feel like they have a voice that is valued, and to develop critical thinking skills. In the world of higher education, in which online learning environments are becoming integral to learning and teaching, it seems worthwhile to investigate the ways in which the communication that takes place within that space can provide students with a measure of 'authenticity' in their learning. For adult learners, making meaningful and honest connections with others seems to be a critical ingredient in achieving such outcomes.

References

Boyatzis, R.E. (1998) Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Briggs, J. & Tang, C. (2003) Teaching for quality learning at university, (4th edn), Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.

Calfee, R.C., Dunlop, K. & Wat, A. (1994) Authentic discussion of texts in middle grade schooling: An analytic-narrative approach. Journal of Reading, 37: 7, 546 – 556.

CQUniversity. (2009) Language and learning: Study guide. Rockhampton: Author.

Cranton, P. (2006) Understanding and promoting transformative learning: A guide for educators of adults (2nd ed.), San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Danaher, G., McDougall, J., Sturgess, P., & Todorovic, V. (2008) 'Changing university learning and teaching from the outside in: The role of discussion forums in supporting student leadership in the STEPS external preparatory program' in J. McConachie, F. Nouwens, P. Danaher, M. Singh, & G. Danaher (eds.), Changing university learning and teaching: Engaging and mobilising leadership, quality and technology. Flaxton, Qld: Post Pressed, 305 – 320.

de Bono, E. (1985) Six thinking hats: An essential approach to business management. London: Little, Brown and Company.

Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C. & Paris, A. H. (2004) School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. Review of Educational Research, 74: 1, 59 – 110.

Gulikers, J. T. M., Bastiaens, T. J. & Kirschner, P. A. (2004) A five-dimensional framework for authentic assessment. Educational Technology Research and Development, 52: 3, 67 – 86.

Hadjioannou, X. (2007) Bringing the background to the foreground: What do classroom environments that support authentic discussion look like? American Educational Research Journal, 44: 2, 370 – 401.

Herrington, J. & Oliver, R. (2000) An instructional design framework for authentic learning environments. Educational Technology Research and Development, 48: 3, September, 23 – 48.

Johannessen, R. J. (2003) Strategies for initiating authentic discussion. English Journal, 93: 1, 73 – 79.

Kennedy, M. (2005) Inside teaching: How classroom life undermines reform. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Knowles, M.S., Holton, E. F. & Swanson, R. A. (1998) The adult learner, (5th ed.). Woburn, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann.

LeCompte, M. D. (2000) Analyzing qualitative data. Theory into Practice, 39: 3, 146 – 154.

McCann, M. (2003) Imagine this: Using scenarios to promote authentic discussion. English Journal, 92: 6, 31 – 39.

Merriam, S. B. & Caffarella, R. S. (1999) Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1991) Transformative dimensions of adult learning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Newmann, F. M. & Wehlage, G. G. (1993) Five standards of authentic instruction. Educational Leadership, 50: 7, viewed 2 August 2013, <http://mathdepartment.wiki.farmington.k12.mi.us/file/view/Five+Standards+of+Authentic+Instruction.pdf/107343505/Five%20Standards%20of%20Authentic%20Instruction.pdf>.

Nystrand, M. (1997) Dialogic instruction: When recitation becomes conversation in M. Nystrand, Opening dialogue: Understanding the dynamics of language and learning in the English classroom, New York: Teachers College Press, 1 – 29.

Pratt, D. D. (1993) Andragogy after twenty-five years. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 57: Spring, 15 – 23, viewed 2 August 2013, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ace.v1993:57/issuetoc>.

Purcell-Gates, V., Degener, S., Jacobson, E. & Soler, M. (2000, November)

Affecting change in literacy practices of adult learners: Impact of two dimensions of instruction. (NCSALL Reports No. 17). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Education; National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy.

Reeves, T.C., Herrington, J. & Oliver, R. (2002) Authentic activities and online learning. Paper presented at HERDSA 2002 Quality Conversations, 7 – 10 July 2002, Perth, WA, viewed 2 October 2013, <http://www.herdsa.org.au/?page_id=176>.

Richardson, V. (2005) 'Constructivist teaching and teacher education: Theory and practice.' in V. Richardson (ed.), Constructivist teacher education: Building a world of new understandings, London: Routledge Falmer, 3 – 13.

Rovai, A. P. (2002) Building sense of community at a distance. The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 3: 1, 1 – 15.

Shackelford, J. L. & Maxwell, M. (2012) Sense of community in graduate online education: Contribution of learner to learner interaction. The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 13: 4, 228 – 249.

Skinner, E. & Derounian, J. (2008) Building community through online discussion. Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, 2, 56 – 70.

Wang, M., Sierra, C. & Folger, T. (2003) Building a dynamic online learning community among adult learners. Education Media International, International Council for Education Media, 40: 1/2, 49 – 61.

About the Author

Dr Jenny McDougall is a lecturer in Academic Learning Services at the Noosa campus of CQUniversity. Her doctoral thesis explored the reactions of Queensland primary teachers to the concept of changing literacies, while her current research interests include adult learning, online learning, critical thinking, and transformative learning.

Contact details

Dr. Jenny McDougall
Academic Learning Services Unit
Central Queensland University,
PO Box 1128
Noosaville, QLD 4566

Email: j.mcdougall@cqu.edu.au