Chapter 13
Online Close and Personal

Developing a Community of Inquiry Using Computer-Mediated Communication

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Introduction

Internationalisation of Higher Education in Australia

The role of universities globally has undergone a conceptual shift in recent years from one that focused on research, teaching and community service to one that emphasises the institution as an educational provider in a market economy (Churchman, 2004, p. 2). This new period in Australian higher education has generally been referred to as ‘internationalisation’, although the term is highly contested, with multiple meanings depending on the context and stakeholders. It may be defined as the combined effect of a variety of international activities involving students, staff, campuses, governments, institutions and curricula (Back & Davis, cited in de Wit, 1995, p. 121), or as a process infusing all aspects of higher education (Francis, 1993, cited in Savage, 2001, p. 1). Matthews (2002) insists that internationalisation policies are based on economic imperatives (pp. 374–375), and Marginson (2003) is also sceptical of any rationale for policy changes in the higher education sector beyond a ‘faith in markets and the business model’ (p. 2). Despite rhetoric alluding to the teaching and learning environment, the institutional focus has been on recruiting students for the fees they will provide rather than for the potential two-way educational exchange.
**Internationalism: An Alternative Approach to International Education**

The *Australian Oxford Dictionary* (Moore, 1999) defines ‘internationalisation’ as ‘to make international’, with the implication that this process is one that is imposed, rather than sought from within. ‘Internationalism’, however, is ‘the advocacy of a community of interests among nations’, a definition which suggests agency, cooperation and commitment. While most of the literature does not make this explicit distinction, many researchers acknowledge the oppositional values implicit in the term ‘internationalisation’. Educational policy makers need to make a dual commitment to educational and cultural objectives alongside economic and political agendas (Volet n.d., p. 1). Internationalism is a personally motivated approach to interculturality in international education, based on negotiation and exchange between students and teachers, and between trans-national institutions.

**Online Learning Environments in the International Context**

In the current higher education context, where ‘internationalisation’ has resulted in the pressure to attract international, fee-paying students, online courses have proliferated. Contextual pressures aside, many educators have embraced the opportunity afforded by new technologies to develop a deeper ‘internationalism’. While many researchers have explored the benefits of e-mail communication (Rodriguez & Brown, 2000), and others have investigated the pedagogy of online discussion lists (McKenzie & Murphy, 2000) in the international context, this chapter analyses both online learning environments with the aim of identifying the discourse features which build a diverse community of learners. The results of Bretag’s (2005) research on e-mail communication are juxtaposed with data from a WebCT moderated online discussion. Bretag’s (2005) analysis of 279 e-mails between herself and 10 international postgraduate students who met face-to-face in a weekly seminar is compared with Hannon’s analysis of 191 messages from a WebCT discussion group involving 31 culturally diverse post-graduate students who also met for a weekly seminar.

Based on a method of computer-mediated discourse analysis suggested by Heckman and Annabi (2005), the authors investigate the social presence evident in both corpus. The analysis uses the indicators of self-disclosure, claiming in-group membership and expressing agreement/avoiding disagreement, based on the contention that these are also indicators of a community of learners and by extension, of an emerging ‘internationalism’.

**E-mail Communication Case Study**

*Business Communication for Graduate Students* was a for-credit course open to international, English as an Additional Language (EAL) students enrolled in a