

Beyond “Read and Discuss”: Promoting Dynamic Online Interaction and Humanness Using Mediated Learning Experience

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A lament of some academics wanting to use online learning is their inability to promote dynamic interactions. The basic practice of “read and discuss” does not get to the heart of active and engaged learning. Existing approaches recognize participation for successful online conversation, but do not make transparent the role of the academic instructor as mediator. This paper draws on the theory of mediated learning experience (MLE) to introduce humanness in the motivation to engage in tasks, and ultimately promote student empowerment. Guidelines to move discussion beyond “read and discuss” through meaningful, caring, rich, and challenging dialogue are provided. A design-based instructional methodology directed the study.

Higher education has witnessed a shift from pedagogy to andragogy fuelled by technology itself. Technology’s contribution to education is not to replace poor teaching or, indeed, to make poor teaching better. Its purpose is to enhance learning through quality teaching (Banks, 2006) and, if situated within models (Hrastinski & Keller, 2007 who cite Kerres & de Witt, 2003), theories of learning, and motivation, its impact should affect teaching in qualitative ways. The instructional strategies embedded in the online discussion, not the online environment itself sustains this thinking (Knowlton, 2002). Mass lectures and examinations, the linear, top-down instructional approach in most universities, are being challenged by the need for engaged, active meaning-making approaches in order to produce work-ready graduates capable of transferring knowledge. Nowhere is this challenge greater than in online learning.

To examine new technologies and pedagogies, the Design-Based Research Collective (2003) argues in favor of design-based research, which blends empirical educational research with the theory-driven design of learning environments, [as] an important methodology for understanding how, when, and why educational innovations work in practice. Design is central in efforts to foster learning, create usable knowledge, and advance theories of learning and teaching in complex settings. Design based research also may contribute to the growth of human capacity for subsequent educational reform (p.5).

They further note that educational research is often divorced from the problems and issues of everyday practice- a split that creates a need for new research approaches that speak directly to problems of practice (National Research Council, 2002) and that lead to the development of “usable knowledge” (Lagemann, 2002). Design-based research (Brown, 1992; Collins, 1992) is an emerging paradigm for the study of learning in context through the systematic design and study of

instructional strategies and tools. It is argued that design-based research can help create and extend knowledge about developing, enacting, and sustaining innovative learning environments (p.5).

This paper de-emphasizes behavioral approaches such as the frequency and number of postings made by students in online discussion forums, and emphasizes cognitive constructivism (Kanuka & Anderson, 1999) and humanness by making greater reference to the affective dimensions of learning which also relate to motivation. Meaningful learning outcomes depend on the *cognitive* activity of the learner during a learning event rather than on the learner’s *behavioral* activity during that event (Mayer, 2001). When learners cognitively construct knowledge for themselves, good retention and transfer is likely and “durable knowledge” is reached because the learner creates a personal view of the world (Knowlton, 2001).

Effective online learning designs are underpinned by theories and strategies that purport to stimulate cognitive engagement using verbal and/or visual communication (Schellens & Valcke, 2004). Learning does not automatically occur simply because discussion spaces and topics have been planned. Asking students to read a text, article, or case study and then discuss specific questions supports a behavioral and instructivist approach to learning (Kanuka & Anderson, 1999), and such instructional requirements run the risk of ignoring the human needs of socialization, belonging, and satisfaction. One cannot assume content will be learned and understood or that a change in attitudes will occur as a result of these methodologies. The authors suggest that academics who cannot identify why discussions are unsuccessful begin to think about their role in discussions and the possibility that they may limit, impede or disable learning, instead of promoting intense meaning making. Although new and alternative ways of using “discussion-abled” technology to achieve what cognitively promotes

learning have been developed, it is not so easy to apply them: “learning results from designing lesson materials with the right instructional methods regardless of how the lesson will be delivered” (Clark & Mayer, 2003, p.2). Despondency with past experiences and with aging technologies should not become the reason for abandoning the advantages offered by newer technologies.

Discussions with many academics in two of Australia’s largest universities and across faculties of engineering, education, business, and foundations (off shore pre-university program), revealed that it is still common practice to design a discussion topic online and set students to work, assuming they will engage cognitively, stay on task, and identify implicit issues, concepts, or principles. Theoretically such practice should enable learners to construct meaning, but the degree of learning is limited by factors such as each members’ culture, mindset, knowledge, personalities, and ability and willingness to contribute, disclose their identity, and advance the discussion to a dialogue. This paper explains and demonstrates mediated learning (MLE) and how it was used successfully to bridge these limitations and address these misdirected assumptions.

Literature Review

Over a decade ago, several educators (Barnett 1997; Biggs, 1999; Laurillard, 1993) identified the need for a new approach to higher education, which would prepare students for a future of work in the knowledge era. As more sophisticated and comprehensive discussion-abled programs are developed the greater the imperative to identify how engagement is best fostered. Although there are the learning theories of Piaget, Dewey, Bruner, Vygotsky (Woolfolk, 2004), and the motivational theories of self-determination (Reeve, Dec i& Ryan, 2004), self-personal worth (Covington, 2004), self-regulation (Zimmerman, 2004), and expectancy-value (Perry & Winne, 2004), these theories appear to have little impact on the humanness of online learning. The question arises as to whether the humanness has been decorticated in favor of the management of learning. Further, recent investigations into deep and surface approaches and comparison of face-to-face and online discussions and tasks (Ellis, Goodyear, Prosser & O’Hara, 2006), while providing further insight into the effectiveness of online discussions, claim students could further benefit from knowing how to approach discussions in different contexts. Lampe & Johnston (2005) recognized users’ needs to learn standards for participation in new discussion groups as these are not mature and established social systems, nor do they have a developed sense of how members are expected to behave. Schellens and Valcke (2004) confirmed, “interaction in the discussion groups becomes more

intense, stays task-oriented, and reflects high phases in knowledge construction” (p19) over time when students were involved in solving an authentic case. Gunawardena, (1995) recognized that moderators were central to building social presence and a community. Therefore, in this paper, we consider the concept of *humanness*, particularly from a motivational perspective, and focus on essentials such as respect, trust, valuing, integrity, self -worth, aspirations, and expectations; these are the same human factors that affect learning outcomes in face-to-face environments.

In furthering this thesis for greater humanness in online discussions, support is gleaned from Barnett (2004), who approached it from a curricular and pedagogical perspective: “Neither knowledge nor skills, even high level knowledge and advanced technical skills, are sufficient to enable one to prosper in the contemporary world. Other forms of human being are required” (p.253).

Barnett’s proposed curriculum structure, underpinned by transformation and high risk, summarizes what is required to equip students as human beings in the future. Barnett believes that at the heart of this curriculum there will be an exposure to dilemmas and uncertainties emerging from complexities within a discipline, but requiring the engagement of the human being itself. Previously Barnett proposed that higher education needs to dispense with the notions of teaching and learning and acquire a different vocabulary to address a different way of approaching education. He proposed that clusters of concepts such as “self, being, becoming, action, interaction, knowing understanding, risk, exploration, emotion, interpretation, judging, insight, courage, exposure, daring, authenticity, collaboration, and dialogue” (p. 108) should be seriously considered. Forging this curricular direction involves embedding these concepts seamlessly into higher education, of which online learning is a part. As noted by Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989), “it is not learning the abstraction, but learning the appropriate circumstances in which to ground the abstraction that is difficult” (p19). The challenge, it appears, is for online learning to take abstractions and use humanness to enable greater learning and understanding for students.

It is also noted that online learners want to be in control of their learning (Coomey & Stephenson, 2001) even though it involves disclosing or creating an identity (Freeman & Bamford, 2004), which for some can be a lengthy and painful process. Academics seem the most appropriate persons to consider, support and nurture this control need. Terms like e-moderator (Salmon, 2004), mediator, facilitator have been invented to address the newer role of the supportive educator online. As future workers, graduates will need humanness to explore issues and solve problems. The

complexity of problems in our knowledge society requires that problem-solving activities be shared across disciplinary, cognitive, geographic and cultural boundaries (Leonard-Barton, 1995). The need for students to communicate effectively in the technology world cannot be underestimated and the power of online discussions imbued with humanness may make a significant contribution to knowledge gathering, knowledge building, and knowledge sharing. The purposes of this paper are to present theory and an application of humanness, and through this presentation to demonstrate how easy it is for students to take control of their own learning in an online environment.

In conjunction with elaborating the role of mediator other significant points are raised that also should be considered when designing learning using online discussions. The discussion moderator or teacher has an effect on student participation in online learning (Cashion & Palmieri, 2002; Durrington, 2004, Deloach & Greenlaw, 2005). The personalities, teaching philosophies and attitudes to learners are factors affecting the engagement of students. Adapting online education to different learning styles is also possible (Muir, 2001). Therefore, attention to field dependent and field independent, impulsive and reflective learners and introversion and extraversion should be considered. Further, moderators require the following competencies for asynchronous discussions: allow learners time for reflection, keep discussions alive, and on a productive path, archive and organize discussions for subsequent sessions; establish ground rules for discussion, animate interactions with minimal instructor intervention, sense how online text messages appear to distant learners, and be aware of cultural differences for synchronous discussions (Spector & de la Teja, 2001). Discussions should include content scaffolded with the establishment of a conversational objective, establishment of conversational leader, and a specific conversational schedule (Bray, 2000). Such guidelines for facilitators increased the cognitive quality of student contributions and the processing of information at deeper levels (Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005), also noted in the following research.

- Males and females make more contributions when they belong to the majority gender (Davidson-Shivers & Morris, 2001), and males make more postings than females in mixed gender groups (Deloach & Greenlaw, 2005).
- Communication efficiency in online discussions demonstrated learner conversations (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001) by less repetition, less elaboration and greater specificity and sophistication in decision-making.
- Conversations require a social, teacher and cognitive presence (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000).
- Topic design is relevant to foster students’ ability to engage in quality cognitive discussions (Deloach & Greenlaw, 2005).
- Time delays measured over days affect the quality and quantity of responses (Deloach & Greenlaw, 2005; Jeong, 2004). Jeong found a 17% decline in daily responses overall but a higher response rate over a longer duration for debate/discussion, affirming that design and structure to discussions contribute to quality.
- Online case study or *cybercases* offer alternative and effective distance learning in Information Management (Vinaja & Raisinghani, 2001).
- Relative freedom from complexity decreases need for self-regulation (Corno & Mandinach, 2004). Promoting engagement with technology for high ability students led to gains in volitional competence, increased motivation, higher academic gains in assignments, including problem solving tasks.
- Students bring with them an energizing set of needs, interests and values and when interactions between all participants go well, the environment functions as a support system to satisfy needs, explore interests, refine skills, and internalize values. Further, motivation and engagement are increased. Conversely, when interactions do not go well students get told what to do, losing the control they need and once had. “Under these controlling conditions...behavior reflects socially engineered motivation engineered by incentives and threats that is associated with lackluster engagement, superficial learning, challenge avoidance and a proneness to negative emotionality” (Reeve, Deci & Ryan, p.32).

Still other reviews reveal several worthwhile and applicable enhancers to online discussions, as well as several inhibitors (Ellis, Goodyear, Prosser & O’Hara, 2006; Paz Dennen, 2005; Pozzi, Manca, Persico, & Sarti, 2007). Paramount among these is that learners, now without a physical presence (body language, pauses, prosodic features are absent), “construct experiences and knowledge through analysis of the subject matter, questioning and challenging assumptions” (Marra, Moore, & Klimczak, 2004) using social, teacher and cognitive presence (Garrison, et al, 2000). Deloach & Greenlaw, (2005) would argue that these processes are related to the nature of the task. Computer Mediated Communication and Lam’s (2004)

summary of techniques provides insight into ways academics can generate more quality and focused discussion. Students are socially orientated and spend much time talking with others. Interactions between students and between teacher and students increase the social presence in online learning, but an “MLE” teacher presence may be the key to promoting humanness in the interaction and dialogue. Cognitive presence resides within all students but the catalyst is presenting challenging tasks. If the objective of the discussion is critical debate, it is the academic instructor who structures this initially, notwithstanding the ability of students to subsume the direction and outcomes and emulate the interaction. Students respond to each other when something worthwhile has been said, and they in turn respond when they too have something worthwhile to contribute. Students thrive on cognitive presence, which in turn impacts on self worth or, in Salmon’s words (2004) “weaving, archiving and summarizing” become “added value” in practice (p.10).

Feuerstein’s MLE (2001) describes human interaction and one the principal author has interpreted and applied to online learning to increase humanness. MLE puts the *how* into moderating discussions to maintain the motivation while students construct their learning. The remainder of this paper is about MLE; however, it unfolds in several sections which need not be read in a linear way. I recommend Appendix 1 is reviewed first. This appendix lists the discussion thread in one column and my analysis in the second column. This single thread has been constructed by 8 students from one tutorial group who discuss a question raised by Sharene who is the PoCR or initiator and mediator. The question she raises is in response to a lecture in which children’s language and behavior need to be “read” or interpreted in order to respond appropriately and in a way that meets their needs. Various theories and applications had been presented in the lecture. A brief introduction to MLE and its key characteristics is presented in the next section followed by an explanation as to how MLE contributes to online discussions. A conceptual overview is presented to illustrate the position and importance of MLE. I then return to the specific application of MLE in the context of the threaded discussion as documented in Appendix 1 and provide an analysis of my application through each of the key characteristics. Two sections conclude the paper: Summary of MLE and discussion.

Mediated Learning Experience (MLE)

In MLE a mediator interacts with praise, criticism and encouragement throughout the development of the student’s response as the intention is to understand how the learner approaches the investigation or solving of a problem so that support can be given which will

precipitate learning. The mediator maintains a presence of “warm human being” (Feuerstein, 2001, p.2) by either responding explicitly within the discussion group or personally by emails. Instructor presence is essential (Gunawardena, 1995; Paz Dennen, 2005) but different to face-to-face classrooms. Feuerstein (2001) developed his theory from his effective interactions with children and their learning outcomes and these key characteristics have been extrapolated and applied to the development of discussions online with adults. I present a scaffolded approach as to how I have integrated MLE so that students can comfortably engage in critical discussions online.

In a first year, second semester Psychology of Education subject titled “Teaching, Learning and Assessment,”⁸³ Bachelor of Education (primary) students were allocated to one of four tuteshop groups (combination of a tutorial and workshop). The role and implementation of the online dialogue reflected the author’s philosophy of learning and teaching which recognized i) the diversity of knowledge in the student body; ii) the need to create opportunities for students to fill gaps in their own knowledge; iii) the need for students to engage in critical and reflective thinking; iv) different reasons to be motivated to learn; and v) given these teachers will need to teach and use technology in their classrooms, to provide an opportunity for students to use technology in a non threatening way. The subject was one of 32 subjects in a Bachelor of Education (Primary). Students had been using WebCT and the discussion tool in first semester where they engaged in composing a question, posting it to the discussion board, selecting one to discuss and bringing the written response/s to the tuteshop where it could be discussed in groups. This sequence effectively scaffolded to the next and more complicated use of the discussion board; the contents of this paper.

The online discussions followed a simple structure; it was still post and respond. Appendix 1 documents one short thread which began in week 5 of a 12 week semester by the first year students to illustrate the *holistic* outcome when MLE is used by the students. They follow my use and modeling of MLE in the first 4 weeks of the semester. To obtain meaning from the following explanation it is suggested that this discussion thread in Appendix 1 be reviewed at this point in time.

Characteristics of MLE

Characteristic 1: Intentionality and reciprocity.

The mediator, being concerned about how the learner approaches problem solving, concentrates on understanding and helping the learner to understand how they process information.

“Reciprocity refers to the need for the learner and mediator to see each other on the same level. That is, the lecturer does not pretend to know the answer as to how the learner should be thinking” (p.2). The mediator is a fellow explorer, asking questions, probing for more information, clarification and interpretation. For example to learn requires attention and this prompts the mediator to focus attention on the features, characteristics, key concepts relative to the learning goals they have in mind. In the discussion each student respects the learning being done by each other. The first two messages indicate this strongly and later reference to each other’s ideas emphasizes the respect and reciprocity. They are confident in exposing their knowledge and understanding at whatever level they are at with each other. They help each other to understand and know that it is OK to do this.

Characteristic 2: Mediation of meaning is made explicit. The mediator interprets for the learner the significance of what the learner has accomplished. S/he also mediates feelings of accomplishment. The mediator causes the learner to reflect on the solution, how the solution was obtained and the generalizations, which flow from the solution process. For example the mediator may ask for a summary or ask for an explanation of something in the student’s words which causes the student to realize what they have just learned and that it is valuable. Sharene indicates this in message 2264 when she states “You had some interesting points there Peng” and later, “It’s amazing how many different responses there has [sic] been, and some of them only result in more questions.”

Characteristic 3: Transcendence is made transparent. The mediator assists in bridging the experience and lessons learned in the current situation to new situations, some not yet experienced, but hypothetical. That is, they help students make connections between the specific and general –between theory and practice. The students bring in their personal experiences in relation to the previous ideas and commentary on giving children attention. Sharene the mediator introduces the thread with her dilemma of accepting what I have said in the lecturer and contrasting this against her personal experience. Her tone in this posting indicates she has heard what has been said in the lecture but she calls on her peers in the discussion to help transcend her in more fully understanding the concept. Other students then identify the issue through her stated dilemma and one by one they provide thoughtful and critical comments to build knowledge and deal with their own and each others’ confrontation of existing knowledge and beliefs.

Characteristic 4: Development of affective attributions. Possibly, this is the most difficult of the four characteristics to do in a way that makes all responses genuine. The academic mediates for other

affective components of learning which are valued in learning interactions as summarized below:

The students have demonstrated some of these affective components quite well. All have shared behavior. They have identified the optimism in the discussion and promoted this as noted in their choice of language such as when Kristine agrees with me (message 2215) and “that’s hard for me,” and “I agree with Sara on this one.” Through active “listening” to each response the students are monitoring the ideas presented and either supporting or rejecting them through monitoring type behavior. The students indicate they share a feeling of belonging to this small community of learners.

Table 1
List of Affective Components of Discussion

Feelings of competency	Sharing behavior
Goal seeking/ achieving/monitoring	Challenge: search for novelty & complexity
Awareness for potential for change	Search for optimistic alternatives
Feelings of belonging	Regulation and control of behavior

Contribution to Online Discussions

MLE provides a holistic and human focused strategy for the shift from a transmissive to a constructivist approach. It enables the academic to stand back from the behavioral view of learning and view it from a human perspective. The accumulation of discussion occurs as each quality, supportive and nurturing response affects the next interaction until a wholesome and challenging discussion has been constructed. When students know the mediator and/or their peers are genuinely listening to them, their self-worth rises, and so does their willingness to provide the next response. They then have power to involve others in dialogue and discussion, with power itself a motivator.

An Overview of Origins and Development of MLE

A design-based instructional methodology was employed which required me to reflect each week on my goals and intentions by asking the question: were the students learning? Was their understanding complete, ambiguous or were they confused? My answer to these questions was generated by reviewing each discussion thread weekly. Where I believed learning was incomplete it was brought to the face-to-face tuteshop of the following week. No intense analysis of each thread each week was made but a holistic interpretation emanating from the four

characteristics and tone of the discussion was made. No formal measure of learning was made as the concept of a discussion was perceived to be an aid to learning; just as note taking or summarizing is believed to aid learning. I asked two questions:

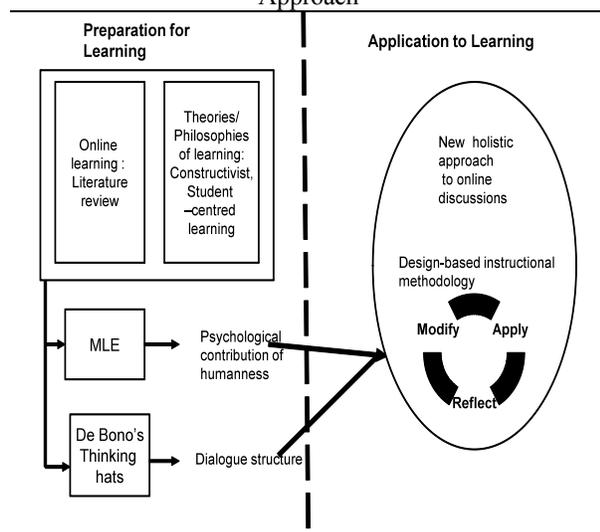
Question 1: Can MLE enhance engagement in online discussions thus contributing to dynamic discussions and learning?

Individual learning in the discussions cannot be measured and in reality contributes only to other formal assessment, or decision making in real world contexts (Kanuka & Anderson, 1999). In other words the application of learning may only reveal itself in a later context, perhaps outside the context of this unit of study.

Question 2: Would I continue to employ this strategy to online discussions in the future?

Several methods of analysis have been developed to examine learning in online discussions (Ellis, Goodyear, Prosser & O’Hara, 2006). Each meets different purposes. However, in this design responses were to be examined from MLE. A conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1 and will be explained in the following section. DeBono’s Thinking Hats assisted in creating a context for critical thinking and MLE assisted to mediate the way students could be critical. This is followed by the outcome of my reflection on each key characteristic and how it was implemented by both students and me.

Figure 1
Two Phases of Preparation, Investigation and Application Within a Design-based Instructional Approach



I used and modeled the four characteristics or the psychological contributions so that students could emulate and empower themselves in discussions within a 12 week semester (ten were discussion topics). By week five students were able to take on the moderator role. How was this achieved?

In semester one I had set up a structure in which the motivation for discussions came from the students (Albon, 2006). This structure was continued but with more integration of critical thinking. Now, using a weekly rotational basis, students in each tuteshop had to construct a question emerging from the lecture in which information was not clear, not understood or ambiguous using an allocated role and post this question to the discussion board (see Appendix 1, Sharene, who begins “I have a question which I’ve wondered about for a while ...”). Each tuteshop group discussed any or all of these posted questions relevant to their group, online. Providing students with a role enabled them to be more critical. A timetable was drawn up so members of the groups knew their role for the weekly postings to WebCT discussion board (Figure 2). Students were allocated to one of four roles which rotated weekly: Role 1 -PoCR (mediator: Post, Challenge, Reflect), role 2 - red hat, Role 3 – white hat, or Role 4 - green hat(as described by De Bono 1990).From Figure 2 week 7 it can be seen that many students may be green hat as this would depend on the surname initial. Each tuteshop discussion group had students in all roles but some roles, as expected, were played by many students. The PoCR had to mediate the discussion with my assistance. In other words there was a stage of co-mediating, which was later withdrawn and the student continued the role.

This structure had the added outcomes of limiting dominance by extraverts, and minimizing gender inequities. More than one student from each tutorial group could be in the PoCR role simultaneously and each would create his/her own and new discussion thread. Each thread could take on a dimension of its’ own. If students did not find the thread challenging, that thread would be discontinued through natural attrition. Thus, not all tutegroups discussed the same things. Nor did all students contribute equally to the same threads or discussion topics emerging from the original question. Such structure and expectations contributed to creating freedom and flow of information, examples and challenges, all very essential to a constructivist approach to learning.

A “freedom and flow” structure respected the learners, their background, life experience and level of understanding and need for empowerment. This was essential to the implementation of characteristics one and four of MLE. I concentrated on being the “fellow explorer” with each tuteshop group, embracing the characteristics of MLE. Later, it was the PoCRs who nurtured and mediated discussions for his/her posting.

Each would make a caring response in acknowledgement and/or add further challenges for reflective thinking. Students could also choose not to participate in meaningless postings. No tracking of postings, word length of postings or number of postings were made. Instead, motivation to share and gain knowledge from each other as a caring community of learners was emphasized. If none or a little discussion was generated through any one PoCR posting then this was quite acceptable and the PoCRs could join another discussion. This approach acknowledges the issues Kanuka and Anderson (1999) identified: ‘the reality of the ambiguous, complex and continually changing world in which we live...learning activities must be presented in an ill-structured way that will reflect this...after the course has ended’ (p.3).

When students took on the role of PoCR and mediated the discussion I supported them with messages in WebCT and emails and occasionally I would post to the discussion board. My message indicated I was personally interested in their responses and I challenged their thinking, thus valuing them as learners. I was implementing MLE in the public messaging system as well as privately.

The red, green and white thinking hat roles added to the complexity needed for learning and had students step outside their adolescent centric view and probe more deeply. Students had to see the question through a different lens and to respond with that same lens for duration of the weekly discussion. This was very challenging but is encouraged students to put aside opinion and defer to the text, lecture notes or knowledge they had from other subjects they were studying to make a more critical response. Students expressed how difficult this was and at times wrote in their postings that this wasn’t their personal opinion. Some confessed they couldn’t always adopt the lens.

The key to the structure and successful dynamic discussions was much more than a ‘post and discuss’. Through reflection, the process of developing quality discussions using MLE was refined and is reported in the following analysis of the application.

An Analysis of the Application of MLE

This section is premised on some understanding of the four characteristics of MLE and how I structured and organized the discussion as presented above. This section will be a narrative of my reflections and is presented again using the four characteristics of MLE because the intention is to highlight the humanness that emerges from adopting each of the characteristics. The examples used refer to the subject ‘Learning, Teaching and Assessment’ in which many learning theories were considered and applied to the teaching context of primary age children.

Characteristic 1: Intentionality and reciprocity.

I was a regular team member, but without pretending I was none other than another lifelong learner who had climbed higher up the mountain than the students. I recognized all participants were on a journey, albeit a different one from each other and mine. I valued empathy among members, shared my background of knowledge and complimented them when they added knowledge which was different to mine. I didn’t assume to be the knowledgeable and trusted other but earned this as discussions proceeded. At all times I modeled the mediator role. I found questioning and challenging students belief system to be the most successful strategies in the discussions, but using the ‘we’ in discussions and not ‘I’. I also integrated this characteristic with the other three. For example, I said “well, we seem to understand how we have arrived at the solution and we all agree on this point of view, but has anybody thought of how it might apply in a situation in which shyness occurs with several learners?” I consciously interacted from behind the scenes, emailing students privately with questions, provocations, compliments, praise or acknowledgements of their problem solving process at work. Sometimes I extended a suggestion made by a particular student via email, who would then post and raise the concern in their words. To this end I would again email the student complimenting them on making a sound contribution. Appendix 1 illustrates the discussion of one small group and one threaded posting during week five of the twelve week semester. The intentionality and reciprocity is clearly evident. It seemed that each student ‘listened’ and knew to make explicit empathy with other posts and intent. Students did not quote text references to indicate they knew something that others did not, but enabled and supported each others clarification and interpretation,

Figure 2
The PoCR Timetable for the Semester

Week	Last Initial A-F	Last Initial G-L	Last Initial M-R	Last Initial S-Z
1	PoCR	Green	White	Red
2	Red	PoCR	Green	White
3	White	Red	PoCR	
4	Green	White	Red	PoCR
5	PoCR	Green	White	Red
6	Ed	PoCR	Green	White
7	White	Red	PoCR	Green
8	Green	White	Red	PoCR
9	PoCR	Green	White	Red
10	Red	PoCR	Green	White
11	White	Red	PoCR	Green
12	Green	White	Red	PoCR

often through their own stories. No one particular entry can stand alone. The complete thread demonstrates how meaning was made.

Characteristic 2: Mediation of meaning is made explicit. I was constantly paraphrasing what I believed to be students intended meaning, or asking if my interpretation was also theirs. In addition, I would declare the significance of any newly constructed knowledge as a learning process, or for the value of the new knowledge. For example: when they realized that developing self-esteem was more related to personal and positive interactions than developing isolated exercises. That is, they provided evidence of the concept I had mentioned in the lecture, I told them that arriving at this conclusion was itself an excellent outcome. I also told them that the process of learning this – the discussion, was extremely meaningful and more powerful than passively reading it in a text book where the concept may have never been internalized and remembered, but skimmed.

Although I found implementing this characteristic more difficult to do often, nevertheless I would ask how they felt having just understood a concept. For example, when they retold an experience from their childhood and how differently they would now teach having learned a theory, I asked how they felt to have this understanding. Obviously opportunities to mediate this characteristic were bound by the flow and context at the moment of time within the discussions, but being aware of making meaning explicit was the first step to implementing characteristic 2.

Asking questions, probing, challenging ideas, identifying myths and being provocative were successful strategies I used as noted above. To encourage reflection on learning I stated a generalization emerging from students’ statements and discussion in terms of “so what you are all saying is that all children will,” and then they debated this generalization by reference to a variety of specific contexts, their knowledge and life experiences. Although students did not model my wording they wrote of their experiences and thoughts and willingly shared these with all group members. It was clear they were involved in making meaning of each posting.

This characteristic is explicit in Appendix 1, not by myself as mediator but by the students. They were bridging their understanding of concepts with personal experience as a way to understanding the theory. As each little experience unfolded it was reflected upon while students grappled with the theory (How much attention should teachers give children?). Again, the thread exists in its entirety and not from individual entries. Sharene however does demonstrate this transcendence in the middle of posting 2264 when she proposes a response about comparing students. Firstly she identifies the issue of comparison presented in the

previous posting (Peng) and then she uses previously learned knowledge from behavioral learning theory as a means to interpret and make significant Peng’s contribution.

Characteristic 3: Transcendence is made transparent. This requires the mediator to think ahead to “what ifs” and possibilities rather than dwelling on what they and students know. This required some creative thinking and knowing where the students were in their degree program, their life journey (school leavers are different to middle adulthood) and some view of the future. For example in my area of education, I applied learning theory to online learning. I asked what homework would look like in the future and then, when responses were made, I repositioned this futuristic view back into the theoretical part of the discussion. My role as mediator became one of bridging where the students were at and moving them to think beyond this. Appendix 1, message 2220 illustrates this characteristic very well. From a cultural position she states what she would do instinctively and then proceeds to acknowledge a new and different situation where disorder can be a possible experience. Again, students did not use my words but created their own way of bridging theory and practice to obtain meaning.

Characteristic 4: Development of affective attribution. Being aware of the features of this characteristic is essential to psychological well being and motivation. Complimenting students on the things they do well, such as sharing a resource they put on the discussion board, helping one another to answer questions, complimenting them on some excellent time management strategy that was effective, are not always easy to do, nor did they come naturally. Such interactive qualities are given in the face-to-face environment and more so in those with children, but adults also need confirmation of behavior that is worthwhile and valuable. However, thinking about this characteristic, addressing it and making it explicit in discussions so others can “hear” it is very powerful. Students felt very valued and proud. To reiterate, my comments were not always made public. I was sensitive to where students were at and often this meant I emailed them. I also learnt that when I emailed a student they invariably told another student and word soon spread about how positive they felt because I had personally corresponded with them in relation to their ideas. Several of the issues raised in the literature such as a gender, dominance by some members seemed to be addressed by attending to feelings. For example, the member who had much to contribute dominated the chats in one group. I emailed this student, praising her knowledge, her positive contributions and effort in completing readings etc, but suggested she give herself a strategy of not responding before four or more other postings had been made. I pointed out the effect in

terms of group dynamics and challenged her as to how she might also deal with a similar situation in a classroom. She was unaware of the impact of her behavior and was extremely grateful I had pointed it out.

Students seemed to be very aware and sensitive to the way they responded online. Use of smiles, greetings, summaries (by PoCR) and debate all indicated a high level of positive responses. Whether this is a direct outcome from MLE cannot be determined in this study but MLE appears to have shaped the dialogue and provided a healthy, spirited tone to the messages. The degree of autonomy, self-worth, self-determination, and self-regulation are evident in the dates of postings, regularity of postings and willingness to share an opinion, particularly for international students, who are usually a little reticent to participate.

Summary of MLE

The above four characteristics were used to show how to engage in online discussions with humanness. I was conscious of each characteristic, and often deferred to a list beside my computer. Further, the provocative nature of some of my responses (exemplified by stating what they know and extending this) at times spurred the discussion to more frequent postings and extensive, but warm responses.

The reference to humanness filled the gap of ‘how’ to conduct online discussion. As noted by Pozzi, Manca, Persico, and Sarti, (2007) ‘the quality of the product is not so important, because it is the process leading to its realization that really generates learning’ (p 170). MLE provided a positive and efficient way forward to interact with students online and for students to positively interact with each other despite differing views. There appeared ‘reciprocal influences in the cognitive processes’ (p 170). The drive for autonomy, self-worth, self-determination and self-regulation were consciously embedded within MLE, making it a more holistic and synergistic approach to use to develop online discussions. However, I emphasized that in order for students to be motivated, the topics for discussion, tasks or questions asked must inherently challenge students. Pozzi, Manca, Persico, and Sarti, (2007) noted students must engage in tasks with tangible outcomes, but I have taken the view that the task itself must be challenging, and meaningful to students which may or may not have tangible outcomes.

Using and modelling MLE enabled cognitive engagement by all participants 83 students (6 tutorial groups). The shortest thread was one response to a PoCR question and the longest was 41 responses to a PoCR question. Appendix 1 is a twelve thread message by 8 students made in the early weeks of the semester. Unlike the issues noted by Lampe & Johnston (2005) in

which the establishment of standards could potentially disrupt the discussion and thus learning, it can be seen in the exemplar in Appendix 1 that these did not exist and while there may be many reasons for this outcome, including transfer of skills from other forums, I have concluded from weekly monitoring that MLE has contributed seamlessly how to discuss online for these first year education students. Results showed, that although some complex questions were asked by PoCRs no trolling or flaming was evident, possibly validating that the human factors of trust, respect, valuing, integrity and self-worth functioned in the discussions.

Discussion

Although several issues emerged from using MLE online, I will highlight three. First, the discrete time frame for students to read and respond to asynchronous postings is touted as affecting quantity and quality of discussion. My approach showed this not to be the case. I used a one-week time frame for students to correspond to the weekly topics and this raised the issue of when students should post. As with the findings by Deloach & Greenlaw, (2005) students found that last minute postings were futile as they went unread. Generally, students would make numerous postings to one and sometimes two discussion threads during the early to mid part of the week. This pattern seemed to reflect that noted by other researchers. Deloach & Greenlaw, (2005) in their investigation of spillovers, noted the time delays in posting, concluding that the longer the delay in responding, as in days, the less likelihood the discussion would be raised to higher levels. They found the discussion was elevated over the duration of two weeks, but I found some discussions were prolific and highly engaging when only one week was allocated. Jeong (2004) found the probability of eliciting additional responses almost tripled if sufficient responses were posted within 24 hours. My results were similar but further examination of the frequency and its relationship to quality of postings in my “freedom and flow” approach is needed as they may possibly relate to other variables of constructivism, topic arrangement and its ownership, and the various motivational theories. The discussion in Appendix 1 shows one late posting, too late for a response but it also showed deep learning by the student.

Two points emerge as significant: 1) The discussions are representative of the learning pathways of students as individuals, and 2) MLE took the focus off behavioral considerations such as length and number of postings and enabled humanness to surface. The students have shown that learning does not need coercive and behavioral approaches. When structure and process are aligned, the willingness to learn

emerged. MLE appeared to be a motivator in learning. It also appears that student confidence, empowerment and cognitive engagement are products of MLE, and were not affected by timing. Bray (2000) used scaffolding and a conversational objective together with a conversational leader and schedule. My approach using MLE shows similarities but goes further to enable the objective of the conversation or discussion to emerge from the learners and create a sharing in the scaffolding. One could say a type of leader is present in my students’ dialogues but in the form of mediator and moderator. The results of my approach concurred with those of Gilbert & Dabbagh (2005): an increase in the cognitive quality of student contributions and the processing of information at deeper levels.

The second issue addresses the optimum number in a group discussion. Groups ranged from 9 to 29 members. The group of 9 was too small for the structure and thus quality dialog. A maximum of two questions to initiate discussion was possible. The allocation of several PoCR roles in the larger groups countered the possibility of one large group forming, although at times two –three groups did form. When some discussions faded through lack of interest in the topic, larger groups automatically formed. I concluded that the ‘freedom and flow’ structure I set up did not limit learning, but promoted learning in directions that students chose in alignment with constructivism.

Finally, humanness is obtained with MLE. Students were empathic, caring and considerate as they argued logically, considered issues objectively and assisted each other to arrive at deeper understandings. Humanness is essential to the development of respect, trust, valuing, integrity, self-worth, self-aspirations and expectations of communication; the human qualities that MLE sought to expose and utilize.

Conclusion

This paper is an initial exploration of the contribution of MLE to online discussions using design-based instructional approach. Online discussions have the potential to contribute to active, engaged and constructive learning if educators recognize and implement appropriate strategies to manage and facilitate dialogue and not rely on the replication of face-to-face strategies, nor provide a “read and discuss” designated topic for the week. My intention was not to isolate variables but focus on the naturalistic, holistic and authentic context to make the online discussion more engaging, dynamic and meaningful, quickly and efficiently. In response to the two questions directing this paper the answers are a resounding yes: I consistently apply MLE in the facilitation of online discussions. The modeling I provided as a mediator in turn transferred to students.

The application of MLE appears to be an effective strategy to shift from passive “read and discuss” approaches to the heights of rich, complex, critical, creative and engaging dialogue in which learning was achieved.

MLE enables the concepts as noted by Barnett (1997) of “self, being, becoming, action, interaction, knowing understanding, risk, exploration, emotion, interpretation, judging, insight, courage, exposure, daring, authenticity, collaboration, and dialogue” to be understood in higher education and achieved through an online learning context. MLE has a role in promoting dynamic interaction to forge new learning for students. Paz Dennen (2005) stated that there is no one better way to teach via online because of the varying contexts, particularly using the interaction of design and facilitation. This paper makes only a small but significant contribution to one of many yet unexplored variables in online discussions.

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Appendix A Student discussion thread

A Discussion Initiated by Student Mediator with Responses Made Using DeBono's Thinking Hats.

Message no. 2211	My Analyses Using MLE
Author: Sharene (Mediator)	
Date: Monday, September 20, 2004 6:07pm	
<p>I have a question which I've wondered about for a while and yet forgot what it was the other day when I wanted to ask it...:-)</p> <p>Anyway, here goes: Rozz is often saying that if a child performs certain behaviors for attention, go and give him that attention! O.K, it sounds alright...BUT...won't that child think 'hey, the teacher gave me attention because I sharpened my pencil for ages...I'll do it again'? Is there another way of reacting as a teacher, or should the teacher follow this policy to the letter?</p> <p>I have another reason for asking: I have a younger sister (12) who has, as long as I can remember, done things for attention. My simple strategy was: ignore... pretend you didn't notice...she just wants attention... exactly!! And Rozz says: give it to her! Right? And I say, no! I'm so used to ignoring...what good will it really do? Please...some suggestions!!!</p>	<p>Incomplete understanding which opens up discussion in a personal way and reaches out to group members. Personal prior and practical knowledge is volunteered. Her personal learning experiences are the major determiner of cognitive functioning.</p> <p>She is imparting meaning which has the power to keep others in the interaction. She is exposing part of herself for others to make judgments – a high-risk behavior but she trusts her environment will support her. She is demonstrating how she is approaching her understanding of an event.</p>
Message no. 2215	My Analyses Using MLE
Author: Kirstine	
Date: Monday, September 20, 2004 8:48pm	
<p>I tend to agree more with Rozz I guess, I find that with those attention seekers, what they need is that attention so give it to them then they'll be like cool I'm all good now I'm over this attention thing I'll get on with something else. Really if you think about it how long does it take to say hey that's good well done.</p> <p>I also have to admit that I have been at the attention seeking end, having an older sister I was consistently doing things to get her to laugh or get mad or something, she used to use that I'll ignore it trick on me and I was just like oh I would rather a kick in the leg rather than nothing its no fun! But yeah hopefully that all made somewhat sense</p>	<p>Student shows intent, follows the focus of discussion to gain meaning and extend this. Transcendence is apparent. Shows how her beliefs contribute to understanding. She is involved in the process of recognizing others understanding followed by additional information. Attempts to transcend but still at a generic level of understanding. Student demonstrated sensitivity in her disagreement to previous post. She offers more understanding to the issue through making inferences based on experience.</p> <p>Applies prior knowledge and verifies attention to the child is needed. She brings in meaning with greater emphasis on intent.</p> <p>Provides further transcendence for others with an example and response to previous posts.</p>
Message no. 2217	My Analyses Using MLE
Author: Sara	
Date: Monday, September 20, 2004 9:08pm	
<p>Well, as long as you give them attention for the things that will encourage positive behavior, so I wouldn't pay attention to a child sharpening for ages, but if they were looking for attention in a positive way id heap it on them ☺</p>	<p>Further intent is developed as student reflects on her understanding and extends this. The focus has shifted from not whether to give a child attention to when to give attention. She takes students beyond their immediate knowledge and understanding, through reflection and synthesis. Others respond.</p> <p>Her conclusion indicates it was written in good spirits despite its brevity.</p>

Message no. 2220	My Analyses Using MLE
Author: Yan Wing	
Date: Monday, September 20, 2004 11:30pm	
<p>I think I would give attentions to those attention seekers as well.</p> <p>Firstly, that's hard for me to leave them alone if I know that what they only want is my attention to look at them, care about them & love them.</p> <p>Secondly, if the student is creating disorder in the learning environment, which affect the other students and their own learning process, then we should do something to stop them. This is for their own good and preserve the rights of the other students to learn as well.</p>	<p>This student shows transcendence between specific and general. She is imparting meaning through an interpretation of the situation. This also shows power and therefore compelling interaction. This student was providing a different cultural perspective and was risk taking in exposing her views on the subject of attention. She introduces a new dimension furthering challenging her peers in their understanding of the concept of attention. Characteristic 4 is very obvious.</p> <p>She does not explicitly provide reference to reciprocity and intent in a specific way, but it is implied.</p>

Message no. 2224	My Analyses Using MLE
Author: Rebecca	
Date: Tuesday, September 21, 2004 7:50am	
<p>I agree with Sara on this one. Give positive attention when they are doing something constructive and then maybe ignore behavior that is less positive. Only problem I have is to go back with the sharpening of the pencil thing. If you ignore them when they have sharpened their pencil to a perfect point wont they eventually think that it is pointless (hehe) and then if the teacher gets angry at the student for having a blunt pencil wont this make them confused?</p>	<p>This student continues with reciprocity and meaning making showing confidence to state who she agrees with. She, like others in the previous postings continues with the sharpening pencil episode to illustrate her point and make it understood. She interprets for others what has been learnt. There is evidence of transcendence because she has made connections between specific and general, although the application differs from the previous postings.</p>

Message no. 2254	My Analyses Using MLE
Author: Laura	
Date: Tuesday, September 21, 2004 3:32pm	
<p>I know a young girl who is constantly misbehaving for her parents. A couple of times when babysitting she has thrown tantrums the minute her parents left the house. What I think is that she thrives on the attention that children need at her age. She receives loads of attention from her parents, but sometimes they completely ignore her and that is when she misbehaves. Now she has gotten to the point where she expects the attention. It is hard to constantly give attention to the each and every student in your classroom. I think we should start with giving very little attention to misbehaving students. In that way they will not expect it when they misbehave.</p>	<p>Laura picks up the misbehaving issue in previous post and bridges this with personal example of her own and then tries to relate these to the teacher in a classroom. Like her peers, she attempts to state what has been learned after she relates another, personal experience.</p> <p>She integrates comments made by others and moves the dialogue forward, illustrating sharing behavior and responding optimistically.</p>

Message no. 2255	My Analyses Using MLE
Author: Kristine	
Date: Tuesday, September 21, 2004 3:39pm	
<p>I would give attention to them, but it depends in what way. I mean if someone was sharpening their pencil continuously for attention, then I would probably address the child in a way that would give them the attention, but also discourage them from continuously sharpening and concentrate more on their work – for example I might say “When you finish your work you can read your favorite book” or something like that. This will entice them to want to learn and not want to sharpen their pencil.</p>	<p>Continues to transcend meaning and challenge others thinking. This post did not enter into any affective behavior, although she has clearly engaged in risk taking by declaring what she would do in a situation. She continues to help her peers find personal relevance.</p>

Message no. 2257	My Analyses Using MLE
Author: Laura	
Date: Tuesday, September 21, 2004 3:55pm	
<p>I agree with you Kristine, try to funnel your attention giving to achieve something more positive.</p>	<p>Laura continues with her second post in half an hour. She gets to the heart of the issue by linking attention giving with positive behavior.</p>

Message no. 2262	My Analyses Using MLE
Author: Peng	
Date: Tuesday, September 21, 2004 7:14pm	
<p>Hello everyone, I think that the teacher should try and prevent the bad behavior(getting out of their seats to sharpen pencils that do not need sharpening on purpose) before it actually happens. The teacher should be alert and intervene before the child gets a chance to behave badly if they can, maybe by moving around the classroom during lessons and using good eyesight to insist that the students are to stay in their seats. Otherwise if it's too late to intervene and prevent that bad behavior, I think ignoring the child is a good idea if they are behaving badly to seek attention. However, if the child's bad behavior cannot be ignored, then I think the teacher should quietly reprimand the child in a way that is only audible to the child misbehaving (punish only as a last option). If the child is behaving badly to seek the teacher's attention, then I think it's a good idea for the teacher to give more attention to students in the classroom who are behaving well. The attention given to students who are behaving well maybe in the form of praise for specific behavior in front of the class. But i think that a teacher should never compare a student's good behavior to another student's bad behavior. This is because when i was younger mum used to compare my behavior to my siblings when they would misbehave, and this would only result in my siblings to not only carry on their bad behavior on purpose but they would also at times become defensive.</p>	<p>Greets everyone, possibly showing a cultural perspective, but it signals involvement of all group members. Continues in the joint venture of helping each other find personal relevance. Develops the dialogue positively into generating the meaning making process. Her understanding from her own personal experience/s contributes to the quality of this current dialogue experience. Sharing behavior is apparent enhancing the feelings of belonging to this group.</p> <p>Shows transcendence in this last paragraph.</p>

Message no. 2264	My Analyses Using MLE
Author: Sharene	
Date: Tuesday, September 21, 2004 8:18pm	
<p>You had some interesting points there, Peng. You're absolutely right: a teacher should rarely compare children's behavior and say: "why cant you be good like Clare?" It may simply cause rivalry and jealousy. If a teacher wants students to 'compare' themselves and be 'good like Clare', she will have to praise Clare for her behavior when other students will hear and be motivated to do the same.</p> <p>It's amazing how many different responses there has been, and some of them only result in more questions! I mean, it's alright to say "pay attention to those who need it" and "ignore those who are simply misbehaving"; but when and how are you going to know which 'path' the child has taken?</p>	<p>Affective attributions are explicit in Sharene's first sentence. The interpretation of what is understood is made from her 'hat' perspective. She is challenging her peers to engage in optimistic alternatives as well as recognizing everyone's contribution.</p> <p>She is promoting competency and belongingness as the PoCR in this discussion. It is difficult to know if the dialogue has finished or if other posts will follow but she has provided 'warm fellow explorer' feedback to her peers at this point in time.</p>

Message no. 2274	My Analyses Using MLE
Author: Yan	
Date: Wednesday, September 22, 2004 12:28am	
<p>I think “depend on the situation” is a fairer solution towards the misbehaving students. It was because when students only want to show his “power” to challenge teachers, then “ignore” is a good idea. On the other hand, if the students are disturbing the others who want to learn, then we should do something to stop them, e.g. stop teaching and stare at him.</p> <p>My previous teachers used to use this strategy because all the class will become quiet immediately and search for the “trouble-maker”. That's really embarrassing to him, so he would stop because of the peers pressure (really effective). I sure most of you have seen this situation before (especially in primary). ☺</p>	<p>Yan states what learners may know, then challenges her peers. New meaning is now called for during the middle of the academic week.</p>

<p>Message no. 2332</p>	<p>My Analyses Using MLE</p>
<p>Author: Terence</p>	
<p>Date: Friday, September 24, 2004 10:45am</p>	
<p>Better put my two cents in.</p> <p>Attention seeking is something we are all going to have to deal with so I am glad to see us all discussing it and how we are going to deal with it when the time comes. From my point of view, I have grown up as the oldest in a group of cousins where they all looked up to me. I have babysat them at times and had to punish or encourage accordingly.</p> <p>From these experiences, I have found that when the child is doing something silly like sharpening a pencil, it is because they have taken something you have said the wrong way. That is not their fault as they are only trying to please you and that kind of attention is positive. I think that we should look to correct the impression we have given because we do want to give that child the attention they crave, but just for the right reasons. Tell the child that you do want a sharp pencil for writing, but that it only makes a difference if they are actually writing and not over the bin the whole day.</p> <p>If they are playing up, sometimes there is just no right answer. There are a number of things you can do and sometimes, not one of them will work. I remember when I was a kid, it was a lot of fun to play up for our Human Biology teacher, but I didn't like doing the same for my maths teacher. Each kid is going to have a different view of different teachers. Because we are lucky to have the kids for the majority of the day, we have the chance to make sure that each child gains their attention from us in the correct ways. Punishment isn't a bad thing, but shouldn't be looked at automatically. ALTHOUGH, it is also worth mentioning that the example for punishment you give to one child, no matter how nice or how bad they are, is going to be implanted in the rest of the class. I think you all know the deal where one kid says "but he got this..." or "but she didn't get in trouble for it".</p> <p>We need to find the problem, but we can not risk damaging the management structure of the classroom for one child and all efforts made to prevent the problem rather than solve it afterwards has got to be good.</p>	<p>This response from the only male member of the group occurs mid morning of the last day of the week when probably most responses have been made. Whether he lacks confidence or likes to lurk first to obtain a fuller picture is not evident. However, he applies each of the four characteristics. He shows that he understands how learning has been occurring: reciprocity and intentionality, mediation of meaning, transcendence made transparent, and perhaps to a lesser extent, recognition of affective attributions. The latter were evident in his greeting, willingness to share – but only at this late and summative stage.</p>