Exploring learner engagement: a comparative study of dedicated online forum threads in an online peer support scheme

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11–14 May 2016 33rd ANNUAL CALICO CONFERENCE
• Context of online peer mentoring scheme
• Issue noticed during the evaluation
• Relational framework and rapport management
• Research questions and methodology
• Initial findings
• Conclusions

Outline

The Open University
Lancaster University
Challenges of learning languages at distance: workload (over 60% OU students in full/part-time employment), confidence and motivation, which affect participation and retention.

Peer mentoring is a well-established practice in HEI to support learners with a wide range of models (Giles and Ody, 2015).

Our model is one-to-many online mentoring using students who recently completed the course to act as mentor/buddy, providing practical advice and moral support at key learning points (e.g. before assignments) in a dedicated sticky thread within an asynchronous online course forum.

Context – Online peer mentoring scheme.
Screen Grabs of Course A Mentor 1 Thread
Results indicate that over 57% students engaged with the mentors; and over 81% found it useful (243 complete responses)

Evaluation: online survey results

Participation

Usagefulness

Extremely useful
Quite useful
Useful
Extremely useful

57%
43%
21%
29.50%
10%
15%
20%
25%
30%
35%
40%
45%
50%
55%
Issue noticed: why different levels of engagement?

**Course A: Peer Mentor 1 Threads**
- By the mentor (81 posts)
- By students (198 posts)
- Other (2 posts)

**Course B: Peer Mentor 2 Threads**
- By the mentor (80 posts)
- By students (30 posts)
- Other (13 posts)

**Course A**
- 65% by the mentor
- 29% by students
- 7% other

**Course B**
- 57% by the mentor
- 26% by students
- 18% other
Further investigating student engagement?

RQ1: What are the distinctive features of communication style of each student mentor (Mentor 1 for Course A, Mentor 2 for Course B)?

RQ2: How are those distinctive features aligned with different rapport orientations?

RQ3: If and how does the use of language influence student engagement?
Theoretical framework

‘Rapport management’ (Spencer-Oatey, 2008); ‘Interpersonal pragmatics (Locher & Graham, 2010) – studying the use of language to manage interpersonal relations/the interpersonal side of communication style to manage outcome in use of language in use of language' (Spencer-Oatey, 2008).
Spencer-Oatey points out four rapport orientations that influence a person’s rapport management strategies (2008:32):

- Rapport enhancement orientation
- Rapport challenge orientation
- Rapport maintenance orientation
- Rapport neglect (neutral) orientation

This study is concerned with the first three due to the supporting nature of the peer mentor threads.
Methodology

Data

- Forum posts – dedicated mentor threads of each course were exported into text files [Course A: 281 posts; Course B: 123 posts]
- Routine statistics – statistics captured by Moodle re the interactions between mentors and students (both active participants who posted messages and passive participants who only read messages)
- Online survey and semi-structured interviews

Methods

- Thematic analysis to categorise themes/topics in the discussion threads
- Survey/interview data
- Exploratory analysis to correlate the above with routine statistics and discourse analysis to correlate key words with the context of conversation
- Explanatory analysis to correlate the above with routine statistics and survey/interview data
- Thematic analysis to categorise themes/topics in the discussion threads

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Criteria for choosing key words using Wmatrix (Rayson, 2009)

• Minimum frequency = 5
• Minimum log-likelihood + 6.63
• Ordered according to LogRatio
• Minimum Log-Likelihood + 6.63
• Minimum frequency = 5

Nine items for Mentor 2 make it above the criteria. Although more items for Mentor 1 make it above the criteria, we only choose the top nine from Mentor 1 to make the comparison work.

(Items that are statistically significant over the other data set to identify lexical, grammatical and semantic features)
Participants’ profiles

Mentors

- Mentor 1 – female, 38, BA in English Language and Literature from OU (modules include English for Academic Purposes, Linguistics)
- Mentor 2 – male, 58, MBA from OU, also studied OU’s Maths and Statistics

Student profile

Note: similar motivation for learning (career and personal development)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Course A</th>
<th></th>
<th>Course B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td>40% A-Level or Equivalent</td>
<td>8% Postgraduate</td>
<td>37% A-Level or Equivalent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td>69% Female</td>
<td>31% Male</td>
<td>43% Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (under 21 – over 65%)</strong></td>
<td>44% (30 – 49)</td>
<td>35% (under 29)</td>
<td>42% (under 29)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviewee profile

2 students from Course B: female, 50 – 60 years old, with HE

AGE (UNDER 21 – OVER 65%) 69%
GENDER 43%
EDUCATION 37%

Participating Profiles

Mentors

- Mentor 1 – female, 38, BA in English Language and Literature from OU (modules include English for Academic Purposes, Linguistics)
- Mentor 2 – male, 58, MBA from OU, also studied OU’s Maths and Statistics
Initial findings:

Mentor 1 & Mentor 2: Key words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Mentor 1 LogAtto</th>
<th>Mentor 2 LogAtto</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>10 concordance helps</td>
<td>20.80</td>
<td>19.15</td>
<td>20.73</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<td>43</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>1 concordance t</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.12</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: The table contains numerical data and key words for Mentor 1 and Mentor 2. The total is calculated by summing the LogAtto values from both mentors.
RQ1: What are the distinctive features of communication style of each student mentor?

Mentor 1 style: Informal, chatty, personal, shorter posts (with 47 smileys and nearly 40 kisses)

Mentor 2 style: Formal, task-focused, information-dense (over 150 bullet points and lots steps, only 8 smileys)

Note: The tenth item of Mentor 1 is ‘helps’, which comes frequently after ‘hope’, in the concordance.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mentor 1

Mentor 2
At least you can check that everything works ahead of the O\-LIVE DROP-IN SESSIONS on Friday, 17th October at 8pm.

1. Go through audio setup (From the "Tools" menu, select "Audio" and then "Audio Setup Wizard") and follow the instructions.

2. Click "Join Session.

3. Download and run the appropriate launcher which you will need to install on your PC or Mac.

4. Enter the room and follow this link in the Online Students Area (for self-help groups).

I recommended:

Install that is a 4.5 Megabyte file, so this may take some time.

Those of you who have used O\-LIVE before might not be aware that has changed slightly this year. When you first access it, you will need to download an installer which is a 4.5 Megabyte file, so this may take some time.

I have many tips to share, but I don't want to overload you. Right now, I recommend installing the new version of O\-LIVE. Checking it works on your PC or Mac by entering the Online Students Area (for self-help groups) and then joining one of the O\-LIVE DROP-IN SESSIONS.

Mentor 2 Example post length (often longer than this)

What is your top tip?

French and the Swedish.

English is the base for learning other languages. I have downloaded the Lexibars both in English and Swedish, which is very easy to use. It is free and simple to download. All you have to do is to select which language you want and follow the instructions. I have downloaded Lexibar both in English and Swedish. I use Lexibar in all the different accents available without having to use complicated shifts. All number combinations.

My first tip is to download a program called Lexibar. This program gives you all the different accents without having to use complicated shifts. All number combinations.

Top tips

Morning.
RQ 2: How are these distinctive features aligned with different rapport orientations? – *Mentor 1*

Predominantly RAPPORT ENHANCEMENT and MANTENANCE

Top 2 key words:

*I + am*

*I am looking forward to hearing from you all.*

*I know how stressful it can become ...*

**Hello –**

Hello Paula, That is a great advise and I do something very similar. I make sure that my folders are on my desktop rather ...
Good + luck

Good Concordance

Good + luck – positive evaluation
RQ 2: How are these distinctive features aligned with different rapport orientations?

Mentor 2: Predominantly RAPPORT NEUTRAL

In – tops the table, a spatial preposition to point out where things are
...Highlight the word(s) in English in the task which are causing you difficulty...

...This sub-folder will become very useful in later TMA's when you have to 'zip up' an audio file...

...This is step-by-step instructions...
RQ3: If and how does the use of language influence student engagement?

Yes, significant evidence showing that it has had influence in four aspects:

1. Content of the student posts
2. Main reason for using the student mentor threads
3. Active participation and level of interaction
4. Multi-level interactions

Yes, significant evidence showing that it has had influence on student engagement.
1) Contents of student posts:
Mentor 1’s threads
- Sharing emotional feelings (worries, stress, nervous)
- Sharing learning strategies, resources, and past language learning experiences
- Asking for technical help
- Clarifying assignment requirements
- Clarifying learning outcomes and course content
- Clarifying assignment requirements

I am a bit worried about sending the TMA... [Student 18]
I’m feeling rather overwhelmed today... [Student 18]

(3) Contents of student posts: Mentor 1’s threads
Mentor 2’s threads:

- Technical – computer related, recording tool, language apps
- Clarifying assignment tasks requirements – formattings, etc
- Learning strategies – how to cope with sharp learning curve
- Saying ‘thank you’
- Contents of student posts: Mentor 2’s threads:

Hi [M2],

...the tips and advice you’ve given here are extremely wise, helpful and gratefully received.

Hi [M2],

This is all very helpful, thanks. Two questions.

1. Is it possible to change the font size of ...?
2. My “drop down” list is horizontal. Is it possible to change it to vertical? I use Windows 7.

This is my very helpful, thanks. Two questions.

Hi [M2],

Saying ‘thank you’,
2) Top reasons for using mentor threads

9 surveyed modules, n: 234

Top three reasons for using the mentor

- Practical help
- Moral support/reassurance
- Not alone

Course A: 20 responses; Course B: 14 responses

Not alone
Moral
Practical info
Support/reassurance
Clarity of assignment
Requirements
Course A
Course B
64% 66%
68% 70%
72% 74%
76% 78%
80% 82%
84% 86%
88% 90%
92% 94%
96% 98%
100% 102%
Active Participation

Active participation include those students who read and posted (against the whole population). Total number of students who just read and those who read/posts against the whole population.

3rd Annual Calico Conference

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Course A (640 students)
Course B (173 students)

Assignment 1
Assignment 2
Assignment 3
Assignment 4
Assignment 5

Total Participation

0% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35% 40% 45%

0% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35% 40% 45%

Assignment 1
Assignment 2
Assignment 3
Assignment 4
Assignment 5

Active participation include those students who read and posted (against the whole population). Total number of students who just read and those who read/posts against the whole population.
Multi-level interactions

• Mentor 1’s threads: single level interaction between the mentor and student(s). Mentor 1 often closes the post by inviting opinion/response, creating more contributions from students. Does this make sense?

• Mentor 2’s threads: single level interaction between the mentor and student(s).

What is your top tip?

How do you all feel about students opinion/response, creating more contributions from students?

Does this make sense?
Extracts of an interaction after Mentor 1 asked 'What is your top tip?'

Student 1: ‘…try to do a little bit on most days rather than doing nothing for a few days and then doing a marathon session…’

Mentor 1: ‘…Great tip!’

Student 15: ‘…break the assignment question down into all the points you have to cover and tick them off as you cover them…’

Mentor 1: ‘…I might try your way next time…’

Student 14: ‘…to be very organised with my computer files…’

Mentor 1: ‘…That is great advice and I do something very similar…’

Student 15: ‘…I do exactly the same as you!’

Mentor 1: ‘…I find listening to a radio station called…’

Student 16: ‘…is a big help…’
Conclusions

- The two mentors have distinctive different communication styles.
  - Mentor 1 is predominantly ‘rapport enhancement’ and ‘rapport maintenance’;
  - Mentor 2 is predominantly ‘rapport neutral’.

Mentor 1’s style means that more students ask questions, share their emotional feelings, and more interaction with the mentor and between students. They use the mentor threads mainly for feeling not alone (sense of belonging to a learning community) and more interaction with the mentor and between students. Fewer students actively interact with the mentor and with other students.

Mentor 2’s style means that more students read his posts because they are information rich, but fewer students actively interact with the mentor and with other students. They use the mentor threads mainly to find practical information/advice.

The two mentors have distinctive different communication styles.
Thank you for listening

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References


