



This is the post-print of Cheng-Wen, H. & Archer, A. 2008. Discursive constructions of medical students identities in informal course-based online discussions. *Education as Change*. 12(1): 3-14. DOI: 10.1080/16823200809487191.

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Discursive constructions of medical students' identities in informal course-based online discussions.

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Abstract

Studies into student identity have tended to focus on formal academic writing for assessment purposes. However, this is beginning to change with a shifting academic and semiotic landscape. More and more tertiary institutions are making use of the writing opportunities afforded by the online environment. Online forums are popular as they promote interaction and discussion among students. This change in the academic landscape has allowed for new approaches to studying the discursive constructions of student identity. Using critical discourse analysis, this paper explores how students construct their identities in informal course-based online discussions in Higher Education. It focuses on the various discourses medical students draw on and the language of online communication in identity construction. By providing a site for students to interact with each other, these online forums enable a more active curriculum where students are involved in the meaning-making process.

Biographies

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Key words

Discourse, writer identity, online discussions, higher education

Introduction

Most research into the construction of student identity has tended to focus on formal academic writing (Lea and Street 2000, Clark and Ivanic 1997, Ivanic 1998, Lillis 2001). However, we argue that less formal, non-assessed student writing is also an important area to examine. In academic writing, the writing is restricted to the set topic, to certain regulated genres and to particular discourses. It is also sometimes produced somewhat artificially for the benefit of the marker. In informal academic writing, particularly that characteristic of online discussions, some of these restrictions are not present. In particular, students can initiate their own topics and use a range of discourses. Taking an academic literacies approach, namely viewing student writing as a social practice where students negotiate their personal and social identities within broader academic literacy practices (Lea and Street 2000), this paper examines how students in higher education construct their identities in an informal course-based online discussion forum in the Health Sciences. We do this in order to think about the ways in which these discursive constructions might be harnessed in the more formal curriculum spaces.

Online forum discussions as site of study

More and more university courses are making use of online environments to enhance the teaching and learning environment. Online discussion forums, in particular, are popular because they are believed to facilitate critical thinking by allowing students to actively participate in meaning-making processes (Black 2005). Since time is limited in classrooms, the online environment provides an ideal space for broader discussions. Students may read and post discussions at any time. In addition, online discussions are said to promote equality as anyone who has access to the discussions can post messages

concerning any issue. The teacher tends to act more as a facilitator than a director (Knobel, Lankshear, Honan and Crawford 1997). This differs from many classroom situations where it is often the teacher who controls and shapes the discussions. As a result, it has been argued that power relations are evened-out in online discussions (Braine 1997, Ortega 1997). At the same time, cultural critics (Poster 1990, Feenberg 1991, Spender 1995) remind us that the environments created by online discussions can also reproduce the complex social conditions connected with cultural values. According to Kress, forms of representation and forms of communication are at one with forms of subjectivity, identity and personality (Kress 1995: 29). Not only do different forms of communication constitute identity, but different forms of communication use different technologies that involve different social relationships. The lack of time constraints, the informal structure, the opportunity to decide on the topic for discussion and the opportunity to share information and debate issues, are a few reasons why online forum discussions are valuable sites to examine the ways in which students negotiate and construct their identities.

The data for this study was drawn from student online discussions in the Health Sciences faculty at a university in South Africa. In 2002 the faculty introduced a new curriculum which sought to encourage multidisciplinary training. The main aim for adding an online component to the curriculum was to educate students in information technology and information literacy. However, it was also important that the online component “enhanced the ability of the students to learn, and to perform as qualified health professionals” (Masters and Oberprieler 2004: 320). As a result, “the nature of the participation was to be guided purely by the philosophy and content of the main

Health Sciences curriculum, with no overt reward or punishment system for participation in the online discussions” (Masters and Oberprieler 2004: 319).

The online component consists of four portals, namely Course Content and Related Materials, Communication Tools, Study Tools and Evaluation Tools. The discussions are accessed through the ‘Communication Tools’ portal. This portal is divided into a number of subsections: academic notes, learning objectives, course content queries, assessment, portfolio tasks, research modules, student governance and off-course discussions. The data for this paper is extracted from discussion messages posted by students in their second year and first half of their third year. Permission to use the data was obtained from both the faculty and the students and all names have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

We examine a discussion entitled ‘We are vultures’. This was extracted from the “off-course discussions” section. *We are vultures* was the 1854th message in that portal and about eleven students contributed. This particular discussion was chosen for the study because it was extraordinary to have so many students involved in one discussion. The students debated amongst themselves, took each other’s ideas and built on them. The students did this voluntarily, and there were no external forces pressurizing them to participate, such as lecturer surveillance or assessment.

Writer Identity

In analyzing the discussion, we take the view that language is not just a tool for communication, but language carries social and power relations (Bourdieu 1990,

Fairclough 1992, 1995). Language is thus a type of social practice that “enacts activities, perspectives and identities” (Gee 1999: 4). Exploring students’ meaning-making activities means acknowledging the jostling of privileged discourses against marginalised, oppositional discourses. Bakhtin emphasizes the struggles and tensions involved in taking control over instances of meaning-making.

The word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language ... but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own” (Bakhtin 1981: 293–4).

Fairclough (1992, 1995), Kress (2000), Clark and Ivanic (1997) point to the tensions around meaning-making and discursive practice as both reproductive and transformative. Our position is that the semiotic resources available to an individual in a specific cultural, social, and psychological history define semiotic ‘potential’. Thus language users are neither wholly subject to a monolithic language system, nor completely free to create their own meanings. There are contradictions and spaces in which they can construct themselves. The discursive history of an individual bears the traces of the discourses associated with the social places which s/he has occupied. These form the representational experience and potential of the sign-maker.

In looking at informal on-line writing, we use Ivanic’s (1998) four aspects of writer identity as an analytical framework: the possibilities for selfhood in the sociocultural and institutional context, the autobiographical self, the discursal self, the self as author. The first aspect is the “actual writer writing a particular text” (Ivanic 1998:23). This has to do with the identities society gives the writer as a result of his/her position in the sociocultural and institutional context. For example, when a doctor publishes an article,

s/he is identified as a health professional because of his/her position in society.

The autobiographical self is “the identity which people bring to any act of writing, shaped as it is by their prior social and discursal history” (Ivanic 1998: 24). This aspect of writer identity is concerned with the life history of an individual. In the case of the doctor above, if the individual was brought up with religious convictions, this may shape or influence the writing. So, if the subject of the article is abortion, the writer may focus on a particular angle because of the writer’s religious beliefs.

The discursal self is “the writer’s representation of her/himself in a text” through drawing on available discourses or conventions that already exist (Clark and Ivanic 1997: 137). This aspect of writer identity is intertwined with the former two aspects as “writers do not create impressions of themselves in a vacuum; they do so by drawing on the possibility for self-hood in the socio-cultural and institutional context” (Clark and Ivanic 1997: 143). In addition, “which conventions people draw upon depends partly on their life-histories, experiences and affiliations to particular groups” (Clark and Ivanic 1997: 143). In the example used earlier, the doctor may make use of diction particular to a religious discourse, such as “faith,” “belief,” and “God” to represent a religious self through writing.

Finally, the self as author looks at how strongly the writer feels about what he/she is writing. It examines the amount of responsibility and certainty asserted into one’s writing as opposed to relying on other peoples’ authenticity. It can be observed through modality (the degree of certainty or credibility of a statement) and the personal

pronouns used.

‘We are vultures’: Possibilities for selfhood

Our possibilities for selfhood are constructed as a result of our positions in society and can include features such as race, gender and occupation. The students in the discussions each have varying possibilities for selfhood. However, despite coming from different cultural and social backgrounds, they share an identity as medical students in a recognized South African university. This is an identity that has a somewhat privileged status both at the university and in society. Medical students are often seen as ‘the cream of the crop’ as the competition to gain entry into the Health Sciences is high. In addition, the fact that the faculty is situated on a separate campus contributes to the sense of an exclusive membership. Because of the privileged status this subject position holds, it is easy and perhaps even desirable for students to construct an identity based on this exclusive membership.

In the future these students will share an identity as doctors. The privileges and power associated with being a doctor are even greater than that of medical students. As doctors, they are ultimately dealing with human lives and, at times, life and death is literally in their hands. The choice for these students is to either accept the power and status that has been traditionally associated with this identity or to challenge it. Ivanic insists that “people *are* agents in the construction of their own identities: they send messages to each other about these socially ratified ways of being, and thereby reproduce or challenge them in the micro-social environment of every-day encounters” (1998: 19). The capacity of a person to be active and creative depends upon the resources (*habitus*)

which they have and people vary in their habitus according to social circumstances (Bourdieu 1990). Habitus is a structuring mechanism that operates from within agents, though it is neither strictly individual nor in itself fully determinative of context. Therefore, despite having much of who we are defined by our possibilities of selfhood in the sociocultural and institutional context, we are still in a position to construct or change certain aspects of our identities. In the following online discussion entitled *We are vultures*, we see an example of how students actively participate in the construction of their future identities as doctors.

Message no. 1854

Author: Unati

Date: Tuesday, May 10, 2005 09:22

Hi guys. Somethin that has just been eating at me recently!

Our studies are gonna make us to become something very similar to vulture. We as future doctors are gonna depend on human suffering in order to make a living. I can even see some of the mentalities of medicine being a business among some of the people in our class. Quite disturbing!

I know that some will say that without doctors people would be dying all willy-nilly and we are here to save them from that. I cannot argue fully with that argument, but it doesn't mean that i feel any better that someone actually has to suffer and go through a lot of stuff just so that i can make money and eat at night!

So don't you guys think that this calls for a change in the medical approach. Why not use much more health promotion instead of the curative approach. This way people won't have to suffer.

Sorry for wasting your time with this long a#s message, but I've been foaming at the mouth to blurt it out to someone. I guess my 'jug' was overflowing

Thoughts?

Figure 1

Unati, writing from the perspective of a second year medical student, begins this particular thread of discussion by questioning the ethics of the medical approach. According to Unati, there are two opposing discourses within the medical practice, namely the curative approach and the health promotion approach. The curative approach emphasizes cure as the key to treating patients. For example, if a patient has cancer then the doctor could recommend chemotherapy as a 'cure'. In contrast, a health promotion approach would emphasize eating correctly and living a healthy lifestyle to prevent getting cancer. Although there are these different approaches to medicine, it is the curative approach that is emphasized and the approach that most doctors adopt. The belief is that patients are more likely to seek out doctors for treatment or 'cure' than for prevention purposes.

Unati's comparison of doctors to vultures clearly suggests his disapproval with his future identity. He identifies the current approach in medicine, the curative approach, as the problem. It is the approach that makes doctors appear heartless as they, in Unati's words, "depend on human suffering in order to make a living". In proposing an alternate approach, Unati is attempting to reconstruct the current beliefs associated with this identity.

The Discoursal self

Identity is not fixed but changes according to the social situation we are in. Sometimes the change may not be all that significant, but certainly different social contexts call for different behaviours and dispositions and the appropriate language to go with these. The discoursal self is the self constructed through discourse. According to Gee, a discourse

is accomplished when one combines various elements such as “language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools and places together in such a way that others recognize you as a particular type of who (identity) engaged in a particular type of what (activity) here and now” (1999: 18).

Here the discursial self is situated in an online environment. Research into interactions in email have found that it “offers a space within which one can construct any number of many possible selves – to role play on a virtual stage, to an audience, without the risks of a live performance” (Moran and Hawisher 1997: 92). While online forums are not the same as emails, they do have similar properties, namely that neither requires face-to-face interaction. Messages can be composed before posting online. As the online environment does not have the immediacy and thus ‘the risk of a live performance’, it could allow us to express a part of ourselves that we would not normally portray in a face-to-face interaction. It could also provide us with the opportunity to carefully craft a representation of ourselves.

‘The Anti-Capitalist’

Unati not only expresses his view on the curative approach but through his utterance he constructs a version of himself. One of the discursial selves he constructs here is anti-capitalist. Unati suggests that doctors who take the curative approach are similar to vultures. He foregrounds the health profession as business-orientated to demonstrate his point. Unati’s logic is that, like any other business, doctors need to “make money and eat at night” and doctors do this by “depend[ing] on human suffering”. He uses strong bodily metaphors to show his disgust at the capitalist impulse, namely the idea of

feeding off death and human suffering. Interestingly, he frames his own reaction to this in similar bodily terms: “foaming at the mouth”. Although Unati does provide a counter argument to his logic, “I know some will say that without doctors people would be dying all willy-nilly”, he discredits this argument by using the word “willy-nilly” which suggests haphazardness, randomness and lack of choice. The exclamation marks in “Quite disturbing!” and in “so that I can make money and eat at night!” also stress the alarming logic behind the counter argument.

In addition to Unati’s view on his future identity as a doctor, aspects of his present identity in relation to the other participants in the discussion surface. According to Gee, “to be a particular *who* and to pull off a particular *what* requires that we act, value, interact, and use language *in sync with* or in *coordination with* other people and with various objects (“props”) in appropriate locations and at appropriate times” (1999: 14). By addressing his audience “Hi guys”, Unati establishes a sense of familiarity and comradeship with them. This is also established by the use of the third person pronouns ‘we’ and ‘us’ which create a sense of a shared group identity. Unati’s use of colloquial words such as “somethin”, “gonna” and “a#s” construct his identity as a trendy young adult. While it is not clear whether the word “somethin” is a deliberate or an unintentional spelling error, the word spelt as it is sets up a “cool visual dialect” (Archer 2005) and contributes to the image of a trendy youth who is familiar with the language of text messages. It also has resonances with an African American accent where ‘g’ dropping is the linguistic variable of choice.

In the discourse of academia, the word “ass” is not necessarily regarded as appropriate.

By ‘disguising’ the word with a hash, “a#s”, it suggests that Unati could be aware of this. While his classmates are most probably his intended audience, Unati is aware that the discussion portal can be read by lecturers as well. The hash suggests that he is ‘mouthing’ the word rather than saying it out loud. While the word could be deemed academically inappropriate, it is nonetheless an important ‘prop’ in the construction of his identity. Curse words are often associated with masculinity and are often part of the lexis of trendy youth. Perhaps if he had not used the hash, one might not have noticed the word. As it is now, the visual symbol, which is different to the symbols of the alphabet, draws our attention. It is a paradoxical situation as the hash functions to ‘hide’ the nature of the word, but actually draws more attention to it. This contradiction points to Archer’s (2005) argument that by using the language of text messaging and e-mail and by adopting certain dialects and social registers, students are able to create ‘liberated zones’ for themselves – partaking in academic discourse whilst also questioning it to an extent.

Liberal humanism

In contrast to the anti-capitalistic discourse Unati draws on, James draws on ‘liberal humanism’ in talking of his future profession and identity. In this extract, James employs a liberal humanist discourse. James’ logic is that “very few disorders or conditions can be truly prevented”. Therefore, although he agrees that prevention is “very important and should form an integral part of any treatment”, the approach is not as effective as the curative approach. The liberal humanist discourse as set up by James constantly refers to people in need of help. James talks of the “sick...in need of medical care”. He also talks of “helping people”, “saving lives” and even “trying to stop death”.

This discourse thus constructs James as a person who is committed to the right to wellbeing of others.

Message no. 1872
Author: James Brown
Date: Tuesday, May 10, 2005 10:45
Hello Unati.

Unfortunately, prevention does not always work, in fact very few disorders or conditions can be truly prevented. Thus, people will be sick and in need of medical care regardless of the measures taken to prevent illness. Thus, I think that helping people and possibly even saving there lives should hardly be compared to vultures. After all vultures only benefit from the dead, and are we not trying to stop death?!!

I do agree that prevention is very important and should form an integral part of any treatment.
Ciao
JB

Figure 2

James also presents himself as a member of the academic community by using words that express a particularly ‘academic’ authorial stance such as “unfortunately”, “in fact”, and “thus”. His response as a whole takes on the genre of letter writing. As one would begin with “Dear” in an introduction to letters, James begins with “Hello Unati”. “Hello” is a more formal address compared to the “Hi” Unati used. However, James ends with an informal “Ciao” before signing off the message with the initials to his name. James’s response is interesting because whilst using academic discourse, and hence creating a sense of formality, he maintains the informal conversational tone by

overusing question and exclamation marks.

'The Altruist'

There are twenty-three responses in total linked to Unati's message. Jenny's posting is the sixteenth response and it comes after much debate has taken place among the students.

Message no. 2010

Author: Jenny

Date: Thursday, May 12, 2005 07:55

Guys,guys,guys...

Isn't every profession, in essence, a vulture???

We all depend on other people to need us - otherwise what purpose would we serve?

Take for e.g. a mechanic waits for your car to break down, the bank waits for you to go into overdraft, the police wait for you to be in trouble, traffic cops wait for you to speed...

The list is long guys – we're not the only vultures, the whole world is dependent on each other – it's animal-animal mutualism (remember Std 6 Bio)?

over-and-out

Figure 3

Instead of addressing a specific individual, Jenny's address is aimed at everybody who has participated in the discussions so far. 'Guys' is a colloquial term for 'everybody'.

The invocation, "Guys, guys, guys...", establishes a sense of belonging and familiarity with the participants in the discussions, as does the use of the first person plural 'we'.

We could describe the discourse used here as one of 'altruism'. Altruism is a concept in zoology that refers to instinctive cooperative behaviour that could be detrimental to the individual whilst contributing to the survival of the species. The logic goes that in order

for society to function smoothly, someone has to make a sacrifice somewhere. Jenny argues that “a mechanic waits for your car to break down, the bank waits for you to go into overdraft, the police wait for you to be in trouble, traffic cops wait for you to speed...” In each case, the victims, expressed through the generalized and thus depersonalized ‘you’, contribute towards the survival of another. Hence “the whole world is dependent on each other”. Jenny’s theory is that every profession preys on a victim, it is a natural cycle, an “animal-animal mutualism”. The health profession is no different from any other professions.

Jenny draws on a genre characteristic of two-way radio where the phrase “over-and-out” is traditionally used when an operator ends a call. The resource of this ‘technical’ genre combined with the discourse of altruism creates an impression of a science-orientated self. This discursal self contrasts greatly with James and Unati’s more humanitarian discourse. However, the visual realization of these discourses remains in line with that characteristic of students’ on-line discussions. Jenny’s writing makes abundant use of punctuation marks which act as visual markers for the pauses and tones characteristic of speech. The multiple question marks at the end of “isn’t every profession, in essence, a vulture???” signify an increase in pitch at the end of the word ‘vulture’, turning it into a rhetorical question which functions as more of a statement. The dash used to break up sentences and the ellipsis that follows the end of the sentences acts as a visual component for breathing patterns in speech. This ‘ungrammatical’ use of punctuation is a trait of student online discourse and in some ways show resistance to the grammatical correctness of written academic discourse.

The autobiographical self

According to Clark and Ivanic, the “conventions people draw upon depend partly on their life-histories, experiences and affiliations to particular groups, and partly on the pressure to conform to the prestigious conventions for the type of writing in the institutional context” (1997: 143). Unati, James and Jenny draw on different discourses to make their arguments, which can partly be attributed to their autobiographical selves.

Clark and Ivanic (1997) point out that, on the one hand, the autobiographical self is the “most intuitively obvious means of writer identity. Everyone is different, because everyone has a unique life experience” (140). Yet, on the other hand, “people’s life-histories and sense of their roots are not inevitable and natural” (140). The discourses we draw on are dependant on the discourses we have encountered in our lives. By asking her classmates to “remember Std 6 Bio” Jenny reveals that she is from a certain generation. ‘Std’, a shortened form of ‘standard’, was a term used in the past in South Africa to refer to the different levels in school (now referred to as ‘grades’). The use of this term suggests that Jenny comes from and possibly identifies with the previous generation of schooling.

“Remember Std 6 Bio” tells us that Jenny took biology as a subject at school. Ivanic (1998) points out that although our life history plays an important part in how we structure our identities and the type of discourses we draw on, it is important to note that these discourses are not entirely ‘natural’. She asserts that “[w]riters construct a ‘discoursal self’ not out of an infinite range of possibilities, but out of the possibilities for self-hood which are supported by the socio-cultural and institutional context in

which they are writing” (28). As a result, the autobiographical and discursal aspects of our identities are necessarily closely intertwined

The self as author

The ‘self as author’ involves the degree of authority and authorial presence the author brings to his/her writing. Clark and Ivanic suggest this aspect of writer identity is “what people usually first think of as ‘writer identity’: whether the writer is present in the writing with a strong authorial voice or not: whether s/he is *saying* something” (1997: 159). Both Unati and James possess a strong authorial presence. This is suggested by the use of the first person pronoun ‘I’. Jenny also uses the first person, but rather than ‘I’, she uses the plural form ‘we’ throughout her argument. ‘We’ is an inclusive term that comprises the author and the reader. By using the pronoun ‘we’ Jenny borrows the voice of others to strengthen her own. This strategy also encourages the reader to identify with her position. Compared to Unati, Jenny expresses a greater sense of authority in her writing. Jenny’s questions are rhetorical, she adopts the first person pronoun “we” to strengthen her argument and confidently speaks on the behalf of others. We see this through her use of generalized truths expressed in the present simple tense: “We all depend...” and “the whole world is dependent...”

Linguistic modality is another means for realizing authorial stance in a text. Epistemic modalities are modalities that are “concerned with the speaker’s confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of a proposition expressed” (Simpson 1993: 49). The epistemic modality Unati uses, “Our studies are gonna...”, “We as future doctors are gonna...”, “I can even see...” and “I know that...”, are categorical assertions that signify a strong

commitment to what he says. His view concerning the ethics of the curative medical approach is strong but at the same time he is careful to express that these are *his* views only. Unati acknowledges that there may be others who do not feel the same way as he does and asks for their opinions on the matter. Clark and Ivanic point out that within one piece of writing, the degree of authority a writer expresses may vary from section to section or even clause to clause (1997:158). The certainty Unati expressed before is diminished in the line “[s]orry for wasting your time with this long a#s message”. This declaration makes him appear somewhat apologetic. However, this uncertainty also acts as a defence mechanism, a disclaimer to protect himself against criticism from his peers.

It is important to note that like the discorsal self, the self as author also changes with particular social contexts and genres – we may assert a stronger presence and authorship in a personal diary than in a science paper. All the aspects of writer identity, namely possibilities for selfhood, the autobiographical self and discorsal self, play a role in shaping the self as author. So, an academic may assert authority in their writing, but avoid using the first person simply because it is not the discursive convention. However, a film critic may make abundant use of first person pronouns because this is expected in their field. Thus, it is important to restate that the social context in which the writer produces the text affects how the self as author is constructed.

The online forum provides a space not only for students to express their opinions but also to make meaning through social construction. Social construction is the means by which “groups of people, bound by shared experiences or interests, build meaning through an ongoing process of communication, interpretation and negotiation” (Duin

and Hansen 1994: 90). Unati's questions on the role of doctors and the different medical approaches urge his classmates to think about the issue and to take a position. Although there is no right or wrong answer to the questions, it is important for students to think about the issue in question as it could affect their attitudes towards their future profession and patients. In making their arguments, students socially construct meaning by building on each other's interpretations and learning from each other. They are thus active subjects in the meaning-making process.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to examine how students construct their identities in informal online discussion forums. Drawing on Ivanic (1998), we have shown that students construct their discursive identities from their possibilities for selfhood, autobiographical selves, discursal selves and authorial selves. These different aspects of writer identity are closely linked. The types of discourses the students draw on depend on those they have been exposed to and identify with, their life histories and cultural backgrounds. The degree of authority and authorial presence depends both on the autobiographical self and the social context within which the text is produced. Rather than seeing these personal and social contexts as determining, we see semiosis as based on the 'interested action' of "socially located, culturally and historically formed individuals, as the remakers, the transformers, and the re-shapers of the representational resources available to them" (Kress 2000: 155). This 'interested action' is "transformative rather than totally creative: that is, it is action on and with existing semiotic (cultural) resources" (Kress 2000: 156). We have argued that through engaging in online discussions, the students' written language is freed up to an extent, from the

conventions of spelling, grammar and punctuation.

In the online environment, students help each other build their identities and knowledge through discussions. In this case, as emergent doctors, a discussion about their future identity is vital because it could affect the medical approach they take in the future.

Communication between students is particularly important, in the social context of South Africa where they come from different backgrounds and cultures.

Communicating beliefs could allow students to obtain a better understanding of one another and promote a culture of, if not tolerance, at least awareness. By providing a site for students to interact, the on-line forums contribute to a more active curriculum where students are involved in meaning-making processes. This forum may also provide a unique space for lecturers to obtain a deeper understanding of their students. This understanding would ideally feed into curriculum design considerations, both to enable critique of medical discourses and identities as well as alternative visions and possibilities for selfhood to emerge.

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