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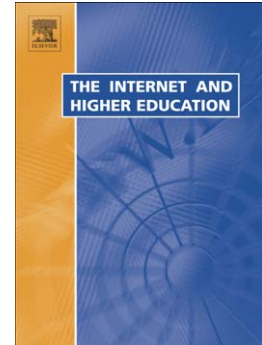
Criticality and the exercise of politeness in online spaces for professional learning

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**Criticality and the exercise of politeness in online spaces for professional learning**

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## Abstract

This research examines masters-accredited online professional learning aimed at fostering criticality and a disposition to collective professional autonomy. Drawing on a model of online learning conceived as a nexus of cognitive, social and teaching presence, we focus principally on the interaction between cognitive and social presence, and the ways in which written language mediates social presence in fostering a critical disposition to professional learning. A key concept for analysing this is *politeness*, predicated on Goffman's construct of 'face', i.e. the work individuals do in presenting themselves to others. We conclude that the 'collective face wants' of the online community led to the creation of an online space in which participants were supported by their peers to do 'being critical'. The purpose of the analysis presented here is to contribute to theory around 'social presence' in order to further the understanding of collaborative learning in online spaces and hence to support the development of pedagogical practices aimed at facilitating this.

**Keywords:** cognitive presence, collective face wants, critical thinking, face, face threatening act, identity, masters level learning, networked learning, social presence, teaching presence

## 1. Introduction

Online learning has become widespread in higher education and many claims have been advanced for the benefits of this mode of engagement, not least the flexibility it affords participants who wish to undertake study while in full time employment. Moreover, the social and distributed nature of learning is now widely accepted and collegiality has been identified as a key aspect of professional learning. Thus, online learning has been increasingly adopted as a collaborative mode of study for those undertaking masters level qualifications in the professions, which is the focus for this paper.

Arguably, the defining quality of masters level study is criticality, explicitly set out in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

(FHEQ Level 7) and the Scottish Credit Qualification Framework (SCQF Level 11). Criticality has been defined broadly as 'skepticism, argument or suspension' in relation to a 'statement, established norm or mode of doing things' (McPeck, 1981, p.6). Criticality is not only deemed an academic attribute fundamental to masters level study within the tradition of a 'liberal education' (Johnston et al., 2011, p. 65) but is also a characteristic of the professional who seeks to question policy and accepted practices. Barnett (2015, p.66) argues that 'critical being' encompasses three domains. These are the domains of formal knowledge, the self, and the world. Critical being thus requires the integration of three forms of criticality, namely critical reason, critical self-reflection and critical action. All three coalesce in the notion of professional *practice*. Fostering criticality is therefore a key concern for university tutors (second only to a rather anal obsession with citation and referencing). But we know from our experience of working with masters students (see Author 1 and Author 2 2015) as well as reports in the literature (for example, Goddard & Payne, 2012) that nurturing the development of criticality is very difficult. Tutors report across modules and programmes that students do not systematically engage critically with research, policy and practices. Students also struggle to understand what is meant by criticality and report that critical engagement with readings and writing in assignments can be problematic and challenging.

A second key issue for masters level professional learning is the development of individual and collective professional autonomy and hence the need for professionals to take responsibility for their own and others' work and learning. This understanding of autonomy, as residing within a profession and acknowledging the obligation to the other, perhaps challenges a rather taken for granted understanding of autonomy as professionals having the freedom to act without let or hindrance. This gives rise to a conundrum, that Pitt and Phelan (2008, p.190) set out quite nicely,

In addition to [the formal attributes of a profession], members of a profession also engage in research, educational activities and discussion that explore, elaborate and transform the profession's collective identity...The relation between professional autonomy and the autonomy of a profession raises a fundamental paradox: the autonomy of a profession depends upon the autonomy of each of its members. Yet

these autonomous participants must create and account for the singularity of the profession as a collective vision of autonomy.

Taken together, this leads to two significant areas for university tutors charged with developing masters level professional learning, viz. the supports required for the development of 'critical being'; and the development of pedagogies for professional learning in online spaces that promote collaborative learning and foster dispositions of individual and collective professional autonomy.

In their still influential study Garrison et al. (2000) conceive the educational experience of formal online learning occurring within a community of inquiry as the product of cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence. Cognitive presence is defined as 'the extent to which the participants [in a community of inquiry] are able to construct meaning through sustained communication' (Garrison et al., 2000, p.89). This, they argue, is a vital element of critical thinking. According to Garrison et al, then, the construction and maintenance of community is a key factor in the development of pedagogies for online collaborative learning. Social presence is

the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally as 'real people' (i.e. *their full personality*) through the medium of communication being used. (Garrison et al., 2000, p.89; emphasis added)

This they suggest is a necessary support to cognitive presence and hence is indirectly necessary for the development of critical thinking. Social presence therefore expedites the attainment of cognitive objectives through the supports it offers to critical thinking (Stodel et al., 2006). Teaching presence concerns course structure and associated pedagogies and assessment practices. Continual tutor presence in the online space, modelling critical discourse, increases student activity and is, Garrison et al. (2000, p.96) claim 'crucial if higher-order learning outcomes are to be maintained'. Teaching presence is the subject of another paper in this study [in preparation]. Here we focus principally on the interaction between cognitive and social presence, and in particular the ways in which written language mediates social presence in the fostering of a critical disposition to professional learning.

Currently, online learning is chiefly characterised by asynchronous communication, mediated via text in the form of discussion forums, blogs, wikis etc. These text-based forms of communication have attracted the widespread attention of scholars working in sociolinguistics who, over the past 25 years or so, have analysed online communication first as media-related interactions but more latterly as user-related interactions which focus on identity and the formation of community (Androutsopoulos, 2006). While this more recent wave of scholarship has rejected the notion of technological determinism as a conditioning force in online interaction, none-the-less, it is clear from the literature that collaborative learning in online environments presents particular challenges, requiring adaptation of the 'normal' linguistic rules governing communication. In particular, whereas face-to-face communication is attended by the social niceties of turn taking etc, which often depend on visual cues, this is attenuated in the online environment (Lapadat, 2007). Effective communication is therefore dependent on discursive strategies employed by participants that foster engagement and so, it is often claimed, lead to the co-construction of knowledge.

Recognising this, online tutors often invest time in setting out the rules for engagement, sometimes referred to under the portmanteau term 'netiquette'. Netiquette concerns the exercise of *politeness* defined by Lakoff (1990, p.34) as 'a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange'. Politeness is a calculation around social need and statuses which aims at relieving the possible difficulties that arise when communicating one's intentions or wants (Eelen, 2001). Politeness is thus fundamental to social interaction, far exceeding the demands of acceptable table manners. Politeness theory, as advanced in the seminal work of Brown and Levinson (1987), draws on Goffman's dramaturgical notions of 'face', the work individuals do in presenting themselves to others, and is predicated on the idea that all speech acts potentially threaten either the speaker's or hearer's 'face wants'. For Goffman the possibilities of shame and the fear of being laughed at underpin all human interaction, (see Scheff, 2014, cited in Author 1, 2015). Thus, Goffman (2005, p.10) says, with delightful archness, while any individual's social face 'may be his most personal possession and the center of his security and pleasure, it is only on loan to him from society; it will be withdrawn unless he conducts himself in a way that is worthy of it'.

This gives rise to what Goffman refers to as the 'rules' of self-respect and considerateness. Under ordinary circumstances, it is in everyone's interests to maintain each other's face in order to prevent the humiliation of 'losing face'. Hence, politeness is necessary to mitigate speech acts which might be construed as threats to face. Such face threatening acts (FTAs) include speech acts such as requesting favours, interrupting another, disagreement, bumping into, requests for information and all the routinely mildly (and on occasions acutely) embarrassing encounters one meets in the daily round:

On this basis, three main strategies for performing speech acts are distinguished: positive politeness (the expression of solidarity, attending to the hearer's positive face wants), negative politeness (the expression of restraint, attending to the hearer's negative face wants) and off-record politeness (the avoidance of unequivocal impositions, for example hinting instead of making a direct request). (Eelen, 2001, p.4)

Brown and Levinson propose this as a universal theory, though subject to cultural elaboration. More recently, scholars have mounted a challenge to Brown and Levinson, not least the claim to universality (see Haugh, 2007). Moreover, while generally giving due recognition to Brown and Levinson's theoretical framework (unless they are merely being polite), Locher and Watts (2005) argue that its focus only on polite behaviour downplays the 'discursive struggle' over politeness, which encompasses polite, impolite, as well as merely appropriate behaviour, and they emphasise the evaluative role of the hearer in determining the im/politeness of a remark. They therefore prefer the term 'relational work' which covers all these speech acts as 'the work individuals invest in negotiating relationships with others' (Locher & Watts, 2005, p.9). Thus they argue, in terms of politeness, behaviour may be 'positively marked' as polite/politic/appropriate; 'negatively marked' as impolite/inappropriate (or conversely, over-polite); or go unmarked or unnoticed as non-polite (rather than impolite), or just 'appropriate'. Strict analytical categories cannot be defined since it is precisely the boundaries between these strategies that are discursively negotiated by those engaged in relational work. This accords more closely with Goffman's concept of 'face' as a discursive achievement 'diffusely located in the flow of events in the encounter' (Goffman, 2005, p.8), which Garcés-Conejos Blitvich suggests, has been misappropriated by Brown and Levinson as a cognitive and individualistic



construct rather than a social negotiation. This shifts the epistemological assumptions underlying politeness theory away from the construction of positivist models which can be used for predictive or explanatory purposes and towards a consideration of how politeness is negotiated and perceived by social actants (Watts 2005). Within this discursive framing the focus of research shifts to a consideration of how im/politeness is '*interactionally achieved* as a joint accomplishment of both the speaker and the hearer' (Haugh, 2007, p.306; emphasis in the original). There is thus a clear (though not fully articulated) connection between 'face' and identity if, as is widely assumed, identity is conceived as the positioning of self in relation to the other, accomplished locally in and through our everyday interactions (Author 1, 2007).

While most im/politeness work has been conducted around face-to-face interactions Morand and Ocker (2002, np) argue that the 'exposure of face' is just as relevant to computer mediated communication (CMC) as any other form of social interaction. Thus, in CMC participants will be 'motivated by dramaturgical concerns' such as the 'desire to appear competent, interesting, considerate to others, and of phrasing messages in such a way as to preserve relational harmony'. Maintaining harmonious relations will involve the use of positive (compliments) and negative politeness (use of tact, deference etc). However, Morand and Ocker propose that the precise nature of FTAs will differ in the online environment (for example around turn-taking, interruption and intrusion). Moreover, the specific forms of such FTAs will be subject to discursive co-construction of norms surrounding interactions in the online space. Morand and Ocker (2002) also point up a tension between clarity of expression and politeness 'for to be polite entails being ambiguous, while to be straightforward can offend' (Morand & Ocker, 2002, np) and, these authors suggest, differences relating to power and social distance will also enter into calculations of im/politeness in the relational work undertaken by participants engaged in CMC (see also Johnson, 1992).

The negotiation of politeness is therefore of particular relevance in online masters level learning in which *criticality* is the defining characteristic. The injunction to be critical within the online space and to promote the critical thinking of other participants potentially introduces an element of tension, as disagreement, which requires careful negotiation. The hypothesis advanced here is that the discursive construction of im/politeness, theorised

through the construct of 'face', is a key aspect of social presence and hence crucial to understanding the development of criticality in online spaces.

## **2. Online professional learning: *Engaging critically with professional practices***

This research focus emerged as we investigated participants' learning in our redeveloped masters programme leading to the award of MSc in Professional Education and Leadership. The introductory module for all the pathways making up the award – *Engaging critically with professional practices* – was, as the name suggests, designed specifically as a means to emphasise the development of criticality. The model we devised has the aim of supporting critical thinking through engagement within a 'networked space' for professional learning. Networked learning depends on social contacts, involving 'the use of information and communication technology to promote collaborative or cooperative connections between learners, their tutors/instructors, and learning resources' (Schreurs et al., 2013, p.34). Constructing teacher professional development as a form of networked learning is key in conceptualising this as an activity which promotes the formation of collective professional autonomy. The networked space is a distributed model of learning which features university tutors and teachers who already hold masters qualifications (whom we have called 'Critical Colleagues') working together to support participants' professional learning within an online virtual learning environment. The Critical Colleague is an innovative role currently being developed by us in the Professional Education and Leadership Team at the University of Stirling together with a number of local authority partners and is aimed at building capacity to support masters level learning in educational settings. The Critical Colleague is able to bridge the divide between school/university, having both recent experience of masters level study and belonging to the same professional spaces as participants and therefore cognisant of current concerns.

The module was undertaken over a period of four months and unfolded in four phases. These were: an analysis of critical frameworks; investigation of professional literacies; exploration of professionalism; and the collaborative production of a 'digital artefact'. Apart from a face-to-face induction the 40+ students worked entirely in the online environment in two groups each supported by one tutor. Five Critical Colleagues worked across the two

groups, responding to student posts and blogs. The module required students to engage with readings and post in discussion forums in the online space. They also kept a professional blog and undertook collaborative work via wikis. One of the aims of the course was to encourage participants to take responsibility for their own and others' learning and hence they were required to respond to postings and blogs in order to advance the critical thinking of their peers (thus blurring the boundaries of 'teaching presence', see Wilson et al, in press). In this they were supported by the tutors and Critical Colleagues. A key aspect of the research around the project was thus the analysis of postings, and the responses to these, in order to investigate the rhetorical strategies used by participants to demonstrate their own criticality and to promote the development of critical thinking of others within the networked space.

In analysing collaborative learning, specifically in relation to the development of criticality, we adopted Barnett's (2015) tripartite model of criticality envisaged as encompassing the three domains of formal knowledge, the self and the world. All three are necessary to the formation of 'critical being' and must be 'held together [or] the danger looms that we might produce students who are adept at critically evaluating, say, literary texts or works of humanistic culture in one way, but who adopt quite different powers of critical evaluation in relation to the world' (Barnett, 2015, p. 63). The forms of criticality associated with these three domains are: critical reason, critical self-reflection and critical action which together underpin a holistic model of critical being appropriate to notions of professional practice. Cognitive presence was therefore evidenced in postings demonstrating formal knowledge (engagement with literature/theory) being brought to bear on the world (policy and practice) through reflection on self (personal experience). Social presence, on the other hand, concerned the interactional flow within which cognitive presence was manifest and through which it was performed.

The focus of the course on developing criticality implies a readiness to question beliefs and assumptions and hence requires the use of rhetorical forms able to mitigate potential tensions. Thus, we were concerned with the rhetorical strategies participants used to do this and in particular in the face work that they engaged in as the mediation between social presence and cognitive presence fostering critical collaborative learning. The purpose of the analysis presented here was to contribute to theory around 'social presence' in order to

further the understanding of collaborative learning in online spaces and hence to support the development of pedagogical practices aimed at facilitating this.

## 2.1 Im/politeness in the online space

For the analysis presented here we looked principally at interactions in a discussion forum undertaken in phase one entitled 'Critical frameworks'. Phase one of the module introduced participants to 'critical thinking' (Paul & Elder, 2008) and presented two models of critical engagement within educational policy drawn from the work of Bell and Stevenson (2006) and Scott (2000). The task set was as follows:

In the *Phase 1 Learning Pathway* you were asked to identify an issue or theme from a policy (or policies) pertinent to your current or future educational practices AND to find a significant research paper and a media article directly related to this policy issue. You were then asked to use the questions offered by Paul and Elder, Scott and/or Bell & Stevenson to devise a critical framework you could use to examine how this policy issue is presented through the various texts you found.

Please post at least two of your critical observations emerging from your analysis. Include the full reference information for texts that you found and are drawing upon. Also share at least one question this analysis has raised for you.

Within the discussion forum the two groups produced 148 and 139 posts respectively. We developed an analytic to assist with the identification of patterns in threads and focused our analysis on 'elaborated' threads. We defined an elaborated thread as one which sparked off an exchange between one or more respondents. (An unelaborated thread is one in which the respondent received no responses or only a single response from a tutor or Critical Colleague. Most unelaborated threads had been posted towards the end of the time period of the discussion forum – this was time limited to one week – and it is likely that other participants had already posted and responded by this time.) In this discussion forum the most complex thread consisted of 16 responses to the initial post and involved nine participants, the group tutor and one Critical Colleague. Most were not of this order of complexity and a range of patterns was evident (see Figure 1).

[insert Figure 1 here]

Figure 1 shows patterns of engagement for one of the groups in the online discussion forum Critical Frameworks, indicating the range of interactions through which collaborative learning was mediated. Each shape indicates a post made by a module participant. Specific individuals are colour coded in the original. Squares indicate initial posts, and circles responses within the same conversation.

We analysed all elaborated threads to examine the negotiations involved in relational work surrounding im/politeness and hence how social presence mediated cognitive presence in support of collaborative learning. We did not, however, construct a formal coding scheme for assessing criticality. Such schemata tend to be based on cognitive (psychological) constructs of criticality (see, for example, Yang et al., 2011) which would have been inappropriate for operationalising a holistic model of criticality relevant to professional practice. Rather, within the parameters of Barnett's tripartite model set out above, we examined the rhetorical strategies by which participants performed 'criticality' within the online space. In this way, we privileged participants own understanding of criticality.

In addition, we audio-recorded face-to-face focus group discussions involving 15 participants following completion of the course to gain insights into their experiences of engaging in the online space. Three discussion groups, each of five participants, were formed and provided with the initial question: 'What is meant by "criticality" and how has it changed my thinking about policy and practice?' These discussions were not mediated by an interviewer. In the analysis of the transcripts of the group discussions for this paper we looked specifically for references to relational work in the demand to foster the criticality of others.

(A note on presentation of data: posts have been presented here exactly as they appeared in the discussion forum; in transcribing interview data we have added conventional punctuation to aid readability. Names have been altered, and gender has been assigned randomly.)

## 2.2 Analysis

### 2.2.1 *The performance of criticality*

In examining the postings it was evident that participants interpreted criticality as questioning policy and their own assumptions about this in relation to practice. In many cases this emerged as a revelation:

Until now, I feel, perhaps embarrassingly so, that I was someone who read a policy and accepted it, readily following it with little more thought or insight. The professional reading has shown me we have the right to question, as part of our professionalism, the policies we are being asked to follow. Just the same as we reflect and critically examine our own practice in the classroom, so too should we critically examine and reflect upon the expectations placed upon us as educational professionals.

A key feature of the module then was the licence it afforded participants as a 'safe space' within which to question aspects of policy and practice.

In the discussion forum Critical Frameworks, participants were asked to initiate a thread by posting a critical analysis of two readings together with key issues this analysis gave rise to. Other participants then responded to this critique. This initiating post, for example, concerned active learning and its promotion in Scottish education policy:

Critical Discussion of Issues - 'Active Learning'

Reading Building the Curriculum 2(BTC2); active learning in the early years, led me to question why it is directed to early years? Does this suggest less importance on active learning and 'play' in the upper years?

Using Targeting Questions drawn from Paul and Elder's (2014) [sic] critical framework, the BTC2 policy 'clarified' that teaching and learning in the infants is more effective through 'play', this led me to pose the question could it be adapted for upper years? Stephen, Ellis & Martlew (2010) mention that 'play' and active learning would be of benefit beyond the preschool years. In my own establishment 'play' is not often used to enhance learning beyond P1. The BTC2 policy suggests teachers should introduce more formal teaching towards the end of P1. The

Guardian Online (Jenkin, 2013) states that play is rarely seen in secondary schools. However, research shows how important 'play' and active learning has on pupil outcomes, if this is the case surely it should be given more priority in schools beyond P1.

STEPHEN, C., ELLIS, J., MARTLEW, J., 2010. Taking active learning into the primary school: a matter of a new practices? *International Journal Of Early Years Education*, 18 (4), pp. 315-329.

JENKINS, M. (2013) 'Play in education: the role and importance of creative learning' *The Guardian*, 27 February [Online]. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2013/feb/27/play-education-creative-learning-teachers-schools> (Accessed: 23 February 2015)

This initial post conforms to Barnett's (2015) tripartite construction of criticality as bringing formal knowledge (albeit only one peer-reviewed article is referred to) to bear on policy and practice, through the lens of personal experience. It has been presented here as a fairly standard example of a post initiating a thread.

In responding to posts that initiated threads the use of questions emerged as a frequent rhetorical strategy by which to demonstrate criticality. The following is a fairly typical exchange between two participants in the Critical Frameworks discussion forum in which participant 1 starts with an ironic comment responded to by participant 2:

1. You are right Penelope ours is not to question! Patrick did say about 'being in hot water' if we do. Surely discussion with those at the chalk face and implementing strategies to achieve the outcome should be considered more, and we should feel empowered to do so.
2. I like this phrase 'feeling empowered to do so'. I wonder if there has been much research done on this? How do we empower teachers when it comes to implementing strategies? Is there a culture developing in the profession where we feel policy has become more of a 'diktat'?

If identity can be defined as the positioning of self in relation to the other (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) then participants here are clearly engaged in 'identity work' as the 'on-going struggle

around creating a sense of self' (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p.1164). In this exchange participants are engaged in the co-construction and performance of identities, in effect doing 'being a critical professional'. Moreover, the rhetorical strategies employed offer *mutual support* in this co-construction thereby enabling each participant to claim this identity. In this exchange the participants demonstrate considerable politeness: they agree with each other, they name other participants, thereby drawing them into the exchange, and they use compliments. In this way it can be seen how the construction of face enters into the performance of identity through these mutual supports.

The demand for criticality might imply an obligation to disagree with others in the online space but this did not seem to be the case. In fact, overt disagreement was very rare. Disagreement, rather, tended to be manifest in relation to the topic/policy under discussion. On the very rare occasions where disagreement was expressed openly this conformed to patterns identified by Pomerantz (1984) in spoken dialogue, and by Mulkey (1986) in epistolary communication, in which disagreement tends to be prefaced by agreement:

by prefacing their disagreements in this way, speakers are responding to the preference structure of the discourse as well as to the specific prior assessment with which they are disagreeing. In other words, the agreement preface is an acknowledgement of the preferred response in a situation where a dispreferred response is about to be produced. (Mulkey, 1985, p.306).

This strategy reduces the force of the disagreement, rendering it less likely to be evaluated by the hearer as impolite or face threatening.

While explicit disagreement was rare, an exception was found in a response to the first contribution posted in the Critical Frameworks discussion forum which ended with the question: 'Should policies be more about opening up our thinking?' In reply to this question, one participant responded as follows:

Thank you for being the first to dive in. I find your question about policies a very interesting one and it dovetails with my reading slightly (more on which i'll post later once i am happier with my articulation). The idea that policies should be more about opening up our thinking is an interesting one. In principal I agree that yes it should,



but in practice this is certainly not the case. As Scott says, it is almost impossible to move away from an 'authoritarian' stance entirely. I have looked in some detail at 'Building the Curriculum 5' [Scottish policy document] as part of my reading and was shocked at just how prescribed and authoritarian it is. If our over arching policies, being the ones that really 'govern' our teaching, are of this nature can they possibly open up our thinking or do you feel that being critical on policies at this level may run us into hot water given that these policies have been created with the assumption that we are not particularly critical practitioners?

In this post the respondent recognises and mitigates the threat to face of the participant, and orients to the point to be made using 'interesting' as a key term of politeness. In fact, the respondent repeats this before introducing an element of disagreement, reducing the face threatening nature of this by agreeing 'in principle' but going on 'If our over arching policies, being the ones that really 'govern' our teaching, are of this nature can they possibly open up our thinking'. Indeed, the respondent places their own face 'on the line', as it were, by adopting an assertive position in the argument: 'this is certainly not the case'. This is the point at which the thread becomes more elaborated. Up to this point the exchange has been between the initial poster, the tutor and the respondent. However, following this post a further six people join in.

Clouder et al.'s (2011) work on agreement in online interprofessional learning similarly found disagreement to be rare. However, they argue that disagreement is beneficial to learning in that 'it generates further discussion' and hence 'attention needs to turn to finding ways of provoking it' (Clouder et al., p.116). Certainly, the one instance of disagreement found in the discussion forum Critical Frameworks, did generate discussion, though these responses tended to agree with the disagreement! However, we also found similarly elaborated threads where no overt disagreement could be discerned. We therefore suggest that within the online community established in this module collective face wants give rise to a mutuality which supports the construction of identity as a 'critical professional' without seeking to undermine the other through what might be evaluated as disrespectful disagreement. *Hence, the discussion forum is a site for the emergence and practice of professional identities in which participants support each other in doing 'being critical'.*

### 2.2.2 *Recognising and reducing the threat to face*

Overall then, very few if any postings could be described as overtly 'impolite' to others in the online community. Impoliteness, where it was evident, tended to be expressed in relation to 'other teachers'. This is the familiar ploy of positioning oneself in relation to the other, who is generally to be found wanting (Author 1, 2012) as the following examples of indicate:

I feel that the links within my own subject of RE lend themselves quite naturally to developing critical thinking skills and higher order thinking however some other practitioners may feel less comfortable with implementing this in their practice

I echo your views on this topic. I find that social subjects and RE can lend themselves well to developing political literacies. However, I do wonder just how confident other teachers (who might not have a political background/interest) are in regards to imbedding this in their practice?

Care is taken to be considerate to other participants, with no direct challenges being issued. Certainly there were no instances of 'flaming' (Lapadat, 2007) or of the kinds of insulting behaviour commonly seen in social media interactions or internet forums (Upadhyay, 2010) and also reported by Conrad (2002) in a study of a cohort of 'mid life adult learners'. Indeed, many of the responses to posts were supportive, recognising the potential exposure of face involved in posting a contribution and in particular of starting off a thread. In the discussion forum Critical Frameworks this was explicitly acknowledged in the response above by the participant who began this by saying 'Thank you for being the first to dive in'. Another common construction was to begin a response with a compliment, often using the term 'interesting'. Moreover, this was frequently embedded within a phrase that begins 'I found' 'I feel' or 'I think' as in 'I found your observation very interesting'. Some analysts have referred to this as a mechanism by which speakers 'hedge on [their commitment to] the truth of the statement' (Johnson, 1992, p.62), thereby mitigating the threat to face that would accompany a more assertive expression. Johnson disagrees with this, however, and

argues instead that this construction is a politeness strategy aimed at moderating a potential FTA by equalising power (since in this situation, the respondent is offering an evaluation of what has been written and hence temporarily occupies a more powerful position). Rather than hedging on commitment, Johnson goes on, it is a strategy which '*emphasizes solidarity* by humbling the writer, by making the writer appear less powerful, authoritative, all-knowing and arrogant' (Johnson, 1992, p.62; emphasis added). The use of compliments along with expressions of agreement such as, 'You are right...', 'I agree with you here...', 'I like your phrase...' functions to support face through positive politeness. A somewhat restricted or formulaic set of responses to postings is therefore evident (which may or may not reflect the respondent's true feelings, see Johnson, 1992). The use of such terms is arguably essential in addressing the 'collective face wants' of the online community. Thus, a calculation of participants might be expressed, 'we all want to be seen as being critical – how can we all support each other so that we all construct/maintain face through our postings and responses'. Recognition of collective face wants is therefore the means by which co-construction of identity as interactional achievement occurs. In this way, politeness mediates social/cognitive presence in the online space and contributes to the learning outcome of critical becoming.

Arguably, 'hedging' as a rhetorical strategy to dodge commitment was of more relevance to the initiators of threads than those responding to a post. Strategies which reduced the threat to face of the initiator of the thread involved careful positioning of self through the posing of questions, rather than asserting a position which might render one vulnerable to disagreement, and supporting the contention with an appeal to authority (citation thus performs a dual purpose: demonstrating criticality *and* reducing the threat to face). For example, the initial post in the elaborated thread involving eight participants (in addition to the tutor) discussed above employs both these strategies, ending:

Should policies be more about opening up our thinking?

" . . . . to put technical and managerial practice in its place, as subservient to democratic political and ethical practice, and to open themselves to diversity and experimentation." Moss and Dahlberg. [2008,p.9]

The posing of questions allows the responding participant to take up a position without expressing disagreement, thereby enabling the respondent to demonstrate criticality. The posing of questions in posts which initiate threads could therefore be seen as a supportive act which reduces the threat to face of the respondent, thereby attending to their negative face wants.

Miller (2013, p.75; emphasis added) proposes that 'an isolated utterance can never be deemed face-maintaining, face-threatening, or face-supporting *outside the context of its production*'. From the group discussions held following completion of the module it is evident that posting a contribution was indeed seen as a context that was potentially face threatening, and this threat was intensified in the online context in which one's utterances are more or less permanently on show. As one participant remarked,

'I did find it daunting though, putting things up, you know, your name's there, everybody can see it'.

Of course, it is not only other participants who read what is 'put up'. A perhaps even more potent threat to face comes from exposure to tutors and Critical Colleagues. If politeness requires a certain amount of circumlocution on the part of participants then tutors and Critical Colleagues can afford to be more direct. Feedback from tutors could include demands requiring that posts be re-drafted, for example to ask for a more critical stance to be adopted, to back up assertions by reference to literature, or to ensure adherence to correct academic conventions (citation and referencing), as in this example:

I believe you were the first to post in Cluster B -- thank you! A few comments:

1. interesting title! how does that play out in your posting? it can strengthen the text when the titles (and even headings and sub-headings in longer writings) are picked up in the text
2. a good point in para 2 about the multiple interpretations of standards -- Connell (2009) does some nice analysis around this issue when she discusses dot-point lists (see p. 219) -- you might want to pick up and expand on her ideas

3. need to see more direct engagement with the articles in your text -- this is one of the hallmarks of academic literacy. For example, in para 2 you mention that "some of the authors argue" ... which authors are these? And throughout your posting please directly cite the authors that are influencing your thinking here -- introduce the way they are framing an issue or the ideas they are exploring. you might critique how they examine a concept or link one writer's arguments to another writer. however you chose to do this, it is important to make sure they are present in your writing.

4. references in reference list not quite correct -- journal articles need issue, volume, and page numbers. can you please revise and post these references as a comment?

Following this feedback the participant re-drafted and reposted their blog.

While Critical Colleagues were not in a position to make such onerous demands they could pose questions of a fairly direct nature, 'What do you mean by...?', for example. Such feedback could potentially be perceived as face threatening to the recipient. However, tutors and Critical Colleagues tended to soften criticisms by use of a compliment in what Johnson (1992) refers to as a 'good news/bad news' strategy as in this example posted by a tutor:

You have found an interesting set of texts - nice work. Each needs to be introduced in order to orient the reader to the focus of each text. I would also like to see your two critical observations more clearly articulated: the points you are trying to make here are not yet clear to me.

Or, as in this case here, a compliment is followed by a generalised criticism directed to all participants:

Some interesting points and questions raised by Simon. I just wanted to call attention to [other tutor's] posting in the General Comments and Questions forum about word count. I won't repeat the points here but did want to reinforce the challenge that all of you will address throughout this module – namely, being able to write in a concise and precise way. It's not easy but it does force one to clarify the really important points of your argument.

In this way, the specific face threat is softened by being deflected. However, this ruse was clearly seen through by participants, one of whom remarked in the focus group meeting:

It was quite nice when, you know, when we had the kind of mentor type input and you'd put something up and [Tutor] or somebody would come back and say 'what about blah blah or', and you'd go, 'oh right', and sometimes you would come and they would ask you something and you would get quite defensive...

This 'defensiveness' was clearly evident though it was often veiled, as in the post made in response to the tutor's comment about word count above:

I did struggle with word count as having read lots of previous postings it seemed important to address the critical framework I was using, the issue and policy documents I was critically analysing (providing evidence of my findings) as well as the questions it raised. It seemed that in many previous posts these were all being sought [by the Tutor] after the initial posts. Perhaps if I had posted earlier I may have limited what I was going to say but knowing what was being asked of others meant I went well over!

(Note the use of the final exclamation mark which arguably performs a remarkably complex function. The response is necessary to reduce the threat to face of the sender who has been reprimanded in the public sphere of the forum, but the recipient is in a position of authority. The sender may not wish the recipient to evaluate the post as impolite and hence the exclamation mark indicates that the sender has not been offended. Thus the sender is able to convey (justified) irritation and compliance simultaneously to two distinct audiences.)

### *2.2.3 Politeness, criticality and social presence*

The discursive struggle over politeness and criticality was explicitly acknowledged in the group discussions following the module, where one participant commented:

I think as well because we're encouraged to be critical of, in a nice way, other people's comments but you're conditioned, like you're sort of socialised to be nice to

people and it's trying to sort of say 'oh aye, I agree with that, *however...*' and it kind of goes against what you've been taught to do, you know what I mean?

However, in response to this another participant clearly (but politely) disagreed, finding the relative anonymity afforded by the online environment supported critical engagement:

I quite liked like the online space for that because although somebody would come up, so I don't know what a name would be but say for example [name] had said something online and you were like what, 'What? That doesn't make sense!' and usually if you're face-to-face you would be like 'aye, maybe' but online you could be like, not tearing apart, but you could be like 'oh right, I disagree and this is why'.

And this view point was supported by another participant,

It's maybe like, sorry, it's maybe like what you said, it's maybe easier to be critical of each other when you're online and not face-to-face because you don't have to worry so much about, you know, offending somebody or you know what I mean it's a bit easier maybe to post it formally in that respect.

There was therefore a range of views expressed in relation to social presence and politeness. Some participants expressed the view that it was easier to be critical of others in the absence of relationship when, as one put it 'everybody is just a name', whereas for others this was inhibiting, going against deeply engrained social norms. Clearly, the evaluative role of both speaker and hearer is important in determining the im/politeness of a remark. It was possible in some cases to match focus group participants with their posts in discussion forums. Though there was no 'tearing apart' the following is perhaps illustrative of the kind of critical comment being referred to by the above participant:

I have to first of all agree with you here Kylie – I'd never thought about professional literacies or what literacies were in any real detail before beginning this course. I also agree with you that in order to provide consistency, there should perhaps be a professional literacy in all matters.

However I also question the practicality of this? As Hector mentions, I think it might be impossible to come up with a definitive list. Environments and times change, as

do initiatives being pushed by Government at all levels so surely literacies would have to change as regularly?

I also agree with a comment on a previous posting that a lot of these literacies overlap – if there was to be a definitive list, there surely would have to be at least a recognition of this?

If in the online space everyone is 'just a name' might this perhaps point to a lack of social presence in the sense in which it is used by Garrison et al (2000, p.89) as the ability of participants to present themselves, and be responded to, as 'real people'? Perhaps a key problem here lies in the definition of 'social presence' which centres on a lay assumption embodied in the term 'real person'. Rather, what is needed is a theoretisation which facilitates exploration of the phenomenon. In this respect, re-conceptualising social presence to incorporate notions of 'face' perhaps offers a way forward. We argue that it is this dimension that is necessary to promote collaborative learning (and hence foster a disposition of collective professional autonomy) within the online community of inquiry. Overt disagreement (*pace* Clouder et al., 2011) could therefore be potentially detrimental as damaging to the collective expression and mutual supports necessary to doing 'being critical'. This is inferred in Conrad's (2002) study which, in contrast to the work being reported on in this study, found quite considerable levels of impoliteness giving rise to significant issues around trust. Pedagogies aimed at provoking disagreement, as advocated by Clouder et al, could therefore produce unwanted effects.

### 3. Conclusions

Within the context of the module participants operationalised criticality as the questioning of policy. In the online discussion forum participants clearly did 'being critical' through their use of rhetorical strategies such as posing questions around policy and practice and citing authority for their arguments. Although they also recognised their responsibility to develop the criticality of co-participants this was characterised by mutual supports offered to enable others to also perform 'being critical', rather than engaging in comments that might potentially be evaluated as impolite and therefore face threatening. In this way participants



clearly attended to the collective face wants of the online community. The creation of an online space in which participants were enabled and supported by their co-participants to perform criticality enabled participants to position themselves, and hence claim the identity of, 'critical professional'. (Where overt criticism was expressed, this tended to be aimed at 'other teachers', a common ploy used to establishing identity, see Author 1, 2012.) The findings therefore support the contention that identity and face are intimately connected and that face is indeed 'an identity based resource, a cluster of identity and relational based issues' Garcés-Conejo Blitvich (2013, p.17).

The exercise of politeness involved a range of strategies which recognised the threats to face of posting in the online discussion forums. Compliments and expressions of agreement were commonplace. Participants initiating threads posed questions rather than adopting assertive stances, thereby reducing their own threat to face through hedging on commitment but this strategy also enabled respondents to these posts to adopt a preferred position without having to express disagreement. Respondents also posed questions in reply, which Johnson (1992) suggests is recognition of the potentially face threatening nature of their (temporarily) authoritative position which they seek to reduce.

Notwithstanding the view expressed by some focus group participants that it was easier to disagree with people in the online space when they are 'just a name', none of the postings displayed anything that could remotely be described as 'flaming'. Disagreements, where they occurred, conformed to patterns in which disagreement was prefaced by agreement (Pomerantz, 1974; Mulkay, 1985). The discussion forums were therefore areas where the exercise of politeness was the norm.

Finally, with regard to social presence, Garrison et al's (2000) proposition that this is the ability of participants to project themselves as 'real people', although a useful enough starting point, seems limited in presenting this as a construct capable of robust theoretical analysis. Here we offer a re-conceptualisation which grounds social presence within a theoretical context based on the need to meet collective face wants. However, it should also be recognised that cognitive presence is itself discursively constructed and cannot therefore be detached from the rhetorical strategies that establish social presence within the online community. The discursive construction of criticality, and the supported performance of the identity of 'critical professional', leads to a collective disposition to

professional autonomy and it is this that could be construed as the 'co-construction of knowledge'. This requires the exercise of politeness, making overt disagreement potentially damaging in the development of online community (as is inferred from Conrad's, 2002, study). We therefore disagree with Clouder et al (2011) that politeness necessarily works against the development of critical being and therefore that pedagogies aimed at provoking disagreement in online learning communities should be adopted as beneficial to critical engagement. We see the relationship as more nuanced and complex, recognising in this imperfect world there may well be trade-offs to be accommodated. However, we argue that mutual support is necessary to enable the emergence and practice of the *identity* of the critical professional and to foster individual and collective professional autonomy, necessary to sustained career-long professional learning. Our findings therefore lend support to the hypothesis that politeness is necessary to support learning in online spaces and we therefore suggest the need to develop pedagogies which acknowledge and are attentive to the collective face wants of participants as an aspect of the identity of the professional engaged in career-long self-evaluation and learning. In setting out our argument we aim to contribute to theoretical knowledge surrounding pedagogies of online learning. Others may disagree with our conclusion and that, we respectfully suggest, is their prerogative.

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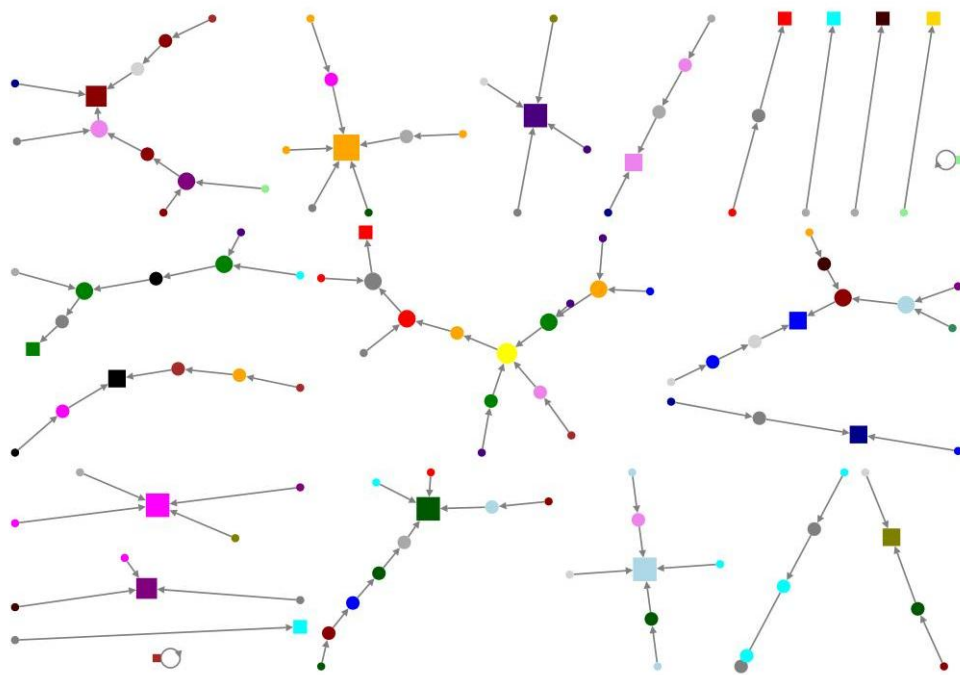
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ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

Figure 1. Patterns of discussion in the DF 'Critical Frameworks'



## Criticality and the exercise of politeness in online spaces for professional learning

### Highlights

- Strategies of politeness enabled participants to engage in the co-construction and performance of identities, in effect doing 'being a critical professional'. The rhetorical strategies employed offer *mutual support* in this co-construction thereby enabling each participant to claim this identity.
- Politeness, conceptualised through Goffman's construct of 'face' and the need to meet one's own and others' face wants is a key construct for understanding learning in online communities and hence 'social presence' can be theorised as the need to meet the collective face wants of the online community.
- Mutual support is necessary to facilitate the emergence and practice of the identity of critical professional and to foster individual and collective professional autonomy therefore pedagogies in online spaces which support collective and collaborative learning (rather than those aimed at provoking disagreement, as some authors have suggested) are necessary.