

# The Impact of Career Focused Online Discussion Forums

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## Abstract

This mixed method research project investigated the impact and utility of online discussion forums (ODFs) hosted by the The Open University (UK) Careers and Employability Services in supporting the career identity, learning and development of Open University students. Despite a substantial evidence base underpinning the use of ODFs within online learning environments for pedagogical applications there is a paucity of scholarly activity linking student participation within ODFs for specific career learning and career development purposes. In addressing this gap, this novel research draws upon influential career theory relating to career learning and career identity to situate student and staff perceptions of careers focussed ODFs and their impact. To achieve this the interactions of higher education students were analysed within six selected ODFs whilst more in-depth insights were captured through student questionnaires and staff interviews. The findings of this study demonstrate the wide-ranging benefits of ODFs for the growth of career identity and learning, and also as a space where critical community inquiry can occur, contributing to deeper approaches to learning for participants.

*Keywords:* Online discussion forums, career learning, career identity, community inquiry, higher education.

The Open University (OU) is the UK's largest provider of distance higher education offering supported, flexible part-time study and open learning. As part of the learning design of its courses, students are encouraged to interact and collaborate with their peers and lecturers in both tutor and module asynchronous online discussion forums (ODFs). ODFs also form an integral part of the OUs Careers and Employability Services (CES) support to students providing the opportunity for peer-to-peer career learning and development at a large scale. In the academic year 2019/20, CES received 24,448 visits to its hosted forums.

An understanding of technological history is important to help position the capabilities of ODFs and their place in a congested online space. Firstly, ODFs are web applications, managing user generated content (UGC) and differ from now popular chat applications which support often shorter synchronous rather than asynchronous messaging services. As more users came online through the 1990s ODFs quickly gained traction in a variety of formal and informal educational contexts demonstrating their potential as a virtual learning environment (Tan, 2017).

Despite their technological maturity ODFs are still regularly used by approximately 10% of online users in the UK and 20% in the US (Pendry & Salvatore, 2015). In part this may be because in most cases ODFs provide the means to communicate using a pseudonym with varying degrees of

anonymity (the ability to be identified by third parties). In an online world where privacy is a recurrent and contested topic there is still an ongoing tension between securing free speech and accountability as precursors for anonymity and identifiability (Véliz, 2019) however, users often abuse this invisibility cloak. Defenders of anonymity online emphasise its value in advancing public debate and safeguarding political dissension. Critics emphasise the need for identifiability in order to achieve accountability for wrongdoers such as trolls.

Beyond privacy concerns researchers also note that ODFs allow time for participants to peruse, respond and reflect upon ideas compared to the immediacy that can be imposed in face-to-face discussions and synchronous technologies such as webchat and webinars (Gao et al., 2013).

It is recognised that UGC has been a major driving force of social media. However, there are some clear distinctions as well as overlap between different social media applications. A common ecology has emerged representing a typology of social media platforms that includes social networking sites (SNS), professional networking sites, micro-blogging services, wikis, video—and picture—sharing sites, social news, bookmarking, and finally forums (Ouiridi et al., 2014).

Consequently, ODFs should not just be viewed as a quaint antiquity superseded by ubiquitous social networking platforms but as an estab-

lished social media application that still has relevance and value today. It is also noteworthy that massive open online courses (MOOCs) which often rely on ODFs within their pedagogical design have received continued interest in the global higher education careers community. The use of MOOCs for career purposes is relatively new but the sector was put on notice with the world's first careers MOOC produced by The Careers Group, University of London in July 2014. This attracted worldwide interest with 89,000 students engaging with the material. This demonstrated the versatility of learning design approaches and the accessibility of ODFs ranging from closed access institutional usage within a virtual learning environment to massive open peer-to-peer spaces.

The wider educational and social benefits of student participation in ODFs are well established. This article presents an exploration of how an internet mediated communication tool such as ODFs can be potentially useful for career enactment which so far has received scant attention in the literature.

### Literature Review

Learners enrolled on online distance learning programmes are usually geographically dispersed so an affordance of online environments such as ODFs is they can bring people together in creating designed online communities. Cooperative relationships are also considered the foundation of a pedagogical model of online learning centered on creating a community (Scherer Bassani, 2011).

Although online interaction is generally viewed as an essential ingredient for learning within asynchronous text based environments such as ODFs there is concern that simple in-

teraction, absent of any structure and leadership, is insufficient (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005) and that time spent studying online is most effective as part of interactive learning (Castaño-Muñoz et al., 2014).

Making use of existing models of interaction such as the Community of Inquiry Model (COI) shown in Figure 1 demonstrates the contingent nature of learning through the creation of an educational community of inquiry underpinned by transaction (Garrison et al., 2001). The model also provides a conceptual framework to delineate, identify, and evaluate both careers practitioner and student contributions within an online space through measuring the extent of social, cognitive and teaching presence within online educational environments such as ODFs.

The iconic theories of community interaction (Law, 1981) and career learning; sensing, sifting, focusing and understanding (Law, 1999) and their value for contemporary careers work provides another critical perspective to explore the influence and social impact of ODFs on career learning and development. This is because the interaction between the individual and the social groups we inhabit invariably influence the course of our life in terms of expectations, support, decisions, and the opportunities this creates.

Within the context of higher education, research undertaken exploring student perceptions and experiences of using online tutor group discussion forums at the OU reinforced some of the existing evidence base for why they are used by students and educators, e.g. forums as a source of peer and tutor support. However, students also reported tensions such as the content of other students' posts and the exposure of the self through writing online (Griffin &

Roy, 2019).

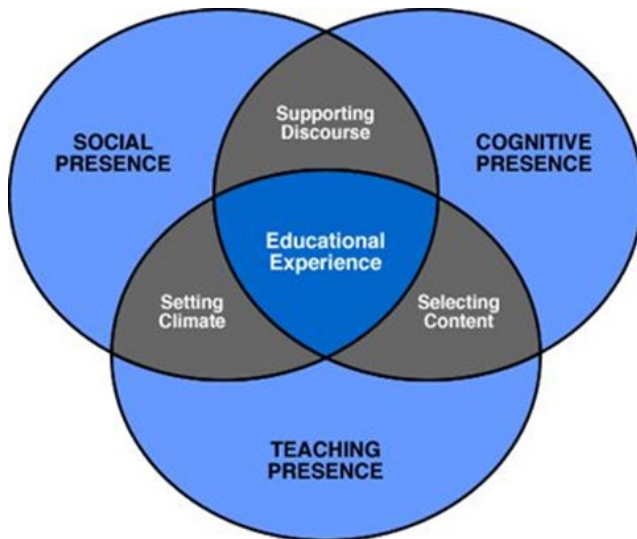
The exposure of self is commensurate to our perceived identity. In the context of work, career identity is defined as a "dynamic multiplicity of personal (in contrast to social and cultural) positions or voices regarding work" (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012, p. 157). It is argued that identity is formed from co-constructed narratives as a result of our social interactions and is thereby apparent in our discourse. Identity can consequently emerge through discursive construction in social contexts through the act of writing and reading (LaPointe, 2010). Subsequently, identity is not fixed but malleable over time (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010). It is therefore proposed that writing can help individuals construct their career story in order to shape meaning and identity. Consequently, writing becomes "an inherently narrative and dialogical process, in the same way that narrative career counselling is" (Lengelle & Meijers, 2014, p. 54).

Social presence (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997) was examined as a predictor of overall learner satisfaction in a text-based medium. The stepwise regression analysis converged on a three-predictor model revealing that social presence (the degree to which a person is perceived as "real") can also be mediated through online communication allowing participants to project their identities online and feel the presence of others, facilitating the potential creation of online communities. In the context of online distance learning or indeed hybrid models of delivery that includes online learning, methods to mitigate social isolation and encourage social learning therefore have renewed importance.

This links closely with modern careers guidance practice requiring narrative approaches which

**Figure 1**

*Community of Inquiry Model (COI)*



can enable individuals to construct a meaningful self-narrative moving from interpretation, story formation and meaning making to decision making and action based on their view of reality (Savickas, 2012). Subsequently, ODFs offer a wealth of opportunity to further explore and examine the life stories students communicate in their written form within a shared online environment.

In addition, how graduates succeed not just academically but also in the labour market has been the subject of intense scrutiny and discourse within higher education in recent years especially under the guise of enhancing graduate employability. In a departure from conventional skills-based approaches to employability the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017) argues interactive forms of capital (human, social, psychological, cultural, identity) are key resources for learners especially for career transition. Identity is recognised as a key constituent of our psychological capital which presents further validation of career identity and social cap-

ital as assets useful for career development and learning. It also provides the rationale to establish the efficacy of career-focused ODFs and explore the value of interactions between the individual and different groups (peers and careers professionals) upon career identity and career learning.

### Methodology

#### Participants

As this study sought to explore the views of OU students, participants were derived from a purposive clustered sample of the current student population (approximately 300,000 including eligible graduates) who voluntarily participated in six selected ODFs taking place between March and May 2019. Participants for this research were then recruited from the sample of students who completed an online consent form.

Additionally, a sample of four OU Careers and Employability Consultants with lead moderator responsibilities for the forums were identified and approached to take part in semi-structured interviews.

The author is a practising Careers and Employability Consultant at the OU so to mitigate bias did not participate in the six selected forums.

#### Research Design

Data collection was obtained by way of three distinct overlapping phases.

#### Phase 1

A self-completed structured online questionnaire. Designed with mainly quantitative scaling questions but with additional open-ended questions to explore the impact of forum participation on career learning, career identity and career development. Jisc survey software was used to host and process the collected data. Participants were invited by email to complete the survey from the six selected ODFs.

#### Phase 2

Qualitative description of OU student posts across six ODFs. It should be noted students could not use pseudonyms when posting and must abide by a computing code of conduct. A high value was placed in student posts speaking for themselves whereby findings are interpreted without straying too far from their literal description (Bradshaw et al., 2017)

As is common with qualitative description content analysis was employed utilising a coding framework that was modified from the Community of Inquiry Model (COI). (Garrison et al., 2001). This was to identify occurrences of seven variables within student forum posts.

**Social Presence (SP).** The degree to which a person is perceived as a real person in mediated communication which therefore allows participants to project their identities online.

**Career Identity (CI).** How a forum member identifies themselves with a specific occupation or career through their discourse.

**Cognitive Presence (CP).**

Relevant to career learning. The extent to which forum members were able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse which is crucial for deep knowledge construction. The coding framework split cognitive presence into the four elements as devised by (Garrison et al., 2001).

- Triggering events - gaining perception of the content, restating and clarifying.
- Exploration - exploring and inquiring how content and ideas are applied to themselves and expressed in stories and opinion.
- Integration - using judgment and evaluation, relating content and ideas. Building and developing arguments.
- Resolution - creating concrete solutions and conclusions.

**Community Support (CS).**

Relevant to social learning. The extent to which forum members offered help and assistance to each other either through encouragement or through access to resources.

**Phase 3**

A semi-structured interview schedule was devised to be undertaken with four OU Careers and Employability Consultants who had moderated and participated in careers forums during the data collection phase (March to June 2019). Thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews was then undertaken (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Findings & Discussion****The Impact of Forum Participation on Career Learning and Development**

The research sought to answer to what extent ODFs were useful to OU students for career learning and career development purposes. From the completed questionnaire responses (n=31) students were generally positive - excluding the “*not helpful at all*” measure - in reporting that forum participation was beneficial in terms of developing their self-awareness (87%) and opportunity awareness through information gathering (90.3%) and supportive for career decision making (90.3%) as proxies for career learning (Law, 1999).

To validate forum activity as a causal factor the survey data was cross tabulated for visits and the time spent in the forums across each variable. As the number of forum visits increased there was a trend for the helpfulness rating to increase. For example, 75% of students who rated the forum as “*extremely helpful*” for their self-awareness development had visited six times or more and of those who spent longer in the forum (2-5 hours) 35% reported it as being “*very helpful*” or “*extremely helpful*” compared to just 18.8% of students who spent up to an hour in a forum.

Direct and indirect interaction with OU Careers & Employability Consultants and other OU students in the forum also contributed to the career learning of students as seen in Table 1. Students were asked what impact each type of interaction (if it applied) had on them. The impact variables were kept consistent for comparison.

The findings demonstrate the value of different interaction types can be accumulative but also dis-

tinguishable. Students who posted created the possibility of receiving personalised responses by other participants with positive impacts on their career learning.

However, the results also proved for those who “lurk” forum content can still have valuable impact in that participation in ODFs is not limited to just posting as reading can encompass engagement through thought, feelings and reflection (Hrastinski, 2009).

The subsequent analysis of student forum posts in Table 2 to measure Cognitive Presence (CP) demonstrated, at least in part, that the selected ODFs contributed to deeper approaches to learning for some students. The supposition is that high order learning occurs as students’ progress through the logical but idealised elements of cognitive presence. Across the six ODFs it was usually the case a student’s initial post contained questions (triggering events and exploration) and then subsequent posts started to co-construct the replies they received in the form of integration. There may be several factors that help to explain why no posts contained resolution. The complex and subjective nature of our careers and lives does not usually lend itself to positivist traditions. The goal of career guidance is often to explore within many contingencies (such as time) in reaching more concrete conclusions manifesting in decision making.

**The Impact of Forum Participation on Career Identity**

The research design sought to answer how useful ODFs were in helping OU students to explore and construct their career identities. In the questionnaire 94% of students (n=29) reported that the careers forum

**Table 1**

*Comparison of impact on career by interaction type*

Impact of interactions on students	Practitioner (Direct reply to my post/s) N=16	Practitioner (Replies to other students) N=15	OU student Interaction N=31
Gave me new ideas for my career	50%	33%	22.6%
Gave me new information for my career	62.5%	40%	48.4%
Allowed me to become aware of the feelings I have towards my career	43.8%	40%	19.4%
Allowed me to understand myself more	25%	13.3%	25.8%
Allowed me to make career decisions	31.3%	26.7%	22.6%
No impact	6.3%	20%	19.4%

Multi answer: Respondents could select all answers that applied. Percentage of respondents who selected each answer option (e.g., 100% would represent that all this question's respondents chose that option for each column)

**Table 2**

*Post content against the coding framework*

Coding variable: Number of occurrences and percentage*						
		Cognitive Presence				
Social Presence	Career Identity	Triggering Events	Exploration	Integration	Resolution	Community Support
87 (79.1%)	32 (29.1%)	16 (14.5%)	11 (10%)	8 (7.3%)	0 (0%)	15 (13.6%)
<b>Total post count n=110</b>						

\*Percentage of posts with each variable is also given next to frequency of occurrence (e.g., 100% would represent that all posts contained this variable). An occurrence was only counted once per post and each post could contain more than one of the coded variables.

they participated in had some level of impact in helping them understand their career identity with 39% (n=12) of students declaring it as “*very helpful*” or “*extremely helpful*”.

Direct and indirect interaction with OU Careers & Employability Consultants and other OU students in the forums also contributed to some students understanding themselves

more deeply which evidences that identity can emerge through discursive construction in social contexts through the act of writing and reading (LaPointe, 2010).

Social presence was also highly prevalent as 79% (n=87) of the analysed student forum posts (n=110) across the six forums contained this element. Although career identity is

more complex and multi-faceted than social presence alone it can represent a particular voice or position regarding work (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). These voices were apparent in the posts that contained career identity when students described entry into a particular profession or disclosures to their background, personal interests, and current study.

## The Role of Careers Professionals in Forums

The personal experiences of OU Careers & Employability Consultants was considered vital in answering how the role and approach they adopted within ODFs impacted upon OU students' career learning and development.

Five themes were identified (Table 3) from the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the four recorded and transcribed interviews with Careers & Employability Consultants: (1) A learning ecology is a useful way to conceptualise careers forums, (2) the conflict between creating a safe space versus managing privacy, safeguarding and negative psychological impact, (3) the asynchronous nature of forums supports accessibility but provides challenges for guidance practice, (4) ethical principles still underpin the activity of guidance practitioners providing support in forums, and (5) careers practitioners have clear ideas on how roles are demarcated in a forum space.

Careers practitioner opinions about the benefits of career-focused forums reinforced some of the existing literature that utilising them can take advantage of activities such as social interaction, peer-to-peer learning and greater learner control of the material (Tan, 2017). When interviewed, although practitioners identified some of the important benefits of forum participation and the required components of a learning ecology (Brown, 2000) they were not aligned to any specific pedagogical model or approach. Consequently, this does suggest further work is required to enable practitioners to access a theoretical base to better understand their own and student contributions within ODFs, much the same as theory is useful for other modes of careers

guidance intervention.

The findings also demonstrated that ODFs are important mediators of the relationship between social (sharing, community interaction), instrumental (repository for information & knowledge) and psychological (safe space versus safeguarding) domains, suggestive of a complex space that needs careful consideration and management.

## Conclusion

This article has identified and evidenced that ODFs provide a unique combination of benefits that means the limitations of campus-based careers support in terms of time, place and space are removed and the new dimensions of access, interaction and community can be harnessed to reach more students as part of a hybrid model of support. This has never been more important in terms of the global struggle experienced throughout 2020 and into 2021 when online communities may have been a person's only window to the world. For institutions the campus should therefore not be confined to a narrow concept of bricks and mortar but should also incorporate and value the way the internet has changed how we all pursue our career.

The act of writing for our career has also been shown to not just be an endeavour of creative prose. ODFs offer a rich medium to create and share the evolving stories we all have and continue to tell ourselves and others. Part of their allure is they create a technologically opaque veneer to the cognitive worlds we inhabit, open to what we choose to share and our critical literacy to interpret what is shared. Given the maturity of the underlying technology of ODFs but scarcity of scholarly activity it is hoped this study provides

inspiration for careers services and practitioners who have yet to explore their global potential.

## Acknowledgement

The author wishes to acknowledge and show his appreciation that this research was funded by the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU) which is now part of Jisc. A complete report which this article is based on is available on the Prospects Luminare website.

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Table 3

Complete set of themes identified

A learning ecology is a useful way to conceptualize careers forums	The conflict between creating a safe space versus managing privacy, safeguarding and negative psychological impact	The asynchronous nature of forums supports accessibility but provides challenges for guidance practice	Ethical principles still underpin the activity of guidance practitioners providing support in forums	Careers practitioners have clear ideas on how roles are demarcated in a forum space	Miscellaneous
<p><b>Information resource.</b></p> <p><b>Community interaction.</b></p> <p><b>Facilitate interaction.</b></p> <p><b>A space for sharing.</b></p> <p><b>Learning environment.</b></p> <p>Learn about self.</p> <p>Increase opportunity awareness.</p> <p>Provide careers information &amp; knowledge.</p> <p>Develop support network.</p> <p>Practitioners start conversations.</p>	<p><b>Create &amp; maintain a safe space.</b></p> <p><b>Privacy concerns.</b></p> <p><b>Practitioners feel responsible for forum health.</b></p> <p><b>Positive psychological impact.</b></p> <p><b>Negative psychological effects.</b></p> <p>Safeguarding disclosures.</p>	<p><b>Accessibility.</b></p> <p><b>Lurking posting behaviour.</b></p> <p><b>Challenges of asynchronous text based IAG versus 1:1 synchronous guidance.</b></p> <p>Response expectations created by asynchronous versus synchronous.</p>	<p><b>Applying ethical guidance principles.</b></p> <p><b>Posting strategy.</b></p> <p>Understanding students career needs.</p>	<p><b>Create &amp; maintain a safe space.</b></p> <p><b>Facilitate interaction.</b></p> <p><b>Practitioners feel responsible for forum health.</b></p> <p><b>Guests contribute specialist LMI and industry expertise.</b></p> <p>Differing roles. Practitioners curate content.</p> <p>Guests &amp; employers used to attract students.</p> <p>Practitioners start conversations.</p>	<p>Showcase the service to stakeholders.</p> <p>Encourage action.</p> <p>Data driven approach.</p> <p>Size &amp; demand is unpredictable.</p>

Note: Themes associated with a large number of codes are shown in **bold**. Themes that received fewer mentions are shown in plain type

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