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Developing critical reflection in asynchronous discussions; the role of the instructor.

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Abstract:

We report on a study of how instructors in an online management classroom aim to develop critical reflection through asynchronous discussions. There is an on-going debate centered on improving asynchronous discussions in online management education but insights into how these discussions could be facilitated to promote critical reflection remains largely under-developed. We address this issue by considering the extent to which management instructors' perception of their role and understanding of being critical impact their facilitation of asynchronous classroom discussions and the challenges associated with this facilitation. Results from 18 semi-structured interviews with instructors teaching on an online MBA programme at a UK higher education institution show the potential of asynchronous discussions to promote critical reflection. However, we found that instructors often fail to capitalise on opportunities for criticality that arise from classroom diversity and dynamics. Despite the emancipatory intent that underlies programme design, interview data reveals three specific areas of interest: the diversity of instructors' interpretations of what constitutes being critical in asynchronous discussions, a range of individualised facilitation strategies and the impact of imposed design constraints. We offer suggestions as to how to improve the facilitation of critical reflection through asynchronous discussions as well as directions for future research.

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Developing critical reflection in asynchronous discussions; the role of the instructor

Introduction

The move to online teaching amid the Covid-19 pandemic renewed concerns about how prepared we are to teach in this new environment. The pandemic forced many educators to teach online for the first time, rapidly having to adapt their teaching with little, if any, formal training (Krishnamurthy, 2020). Although the general negativity towards online management education has been strongly challenged (Mitchell et al., 2015; Redpath, 2012) it does still exist. However, this emergency shift to online learning has created an opportunity for a more realistic evaluation. This should prompt business schools to consider how students might prefer to learn in the future (Krishnamurthy, 2020), and ensure that well-prepared faculty and appropriate pedagogies are in place.

The bias against online learning (Redpath, 2012) which frames it as a passive and inferior form of learning is countered by research showing that online learning can be associated with a sense of questioning (Hay et al., 2004), exploring and challenging differing opinions in more engaged and meaningful ways (Ravenscroft, 2011), and that this can take place in asynchronous discussions (Goumaa et al., 2019). Critical perspectives on management education promote critical reflection (Cunliffe, 2004) as a way of helping managers respond to ill-defined situations (Cunliffe, 2002). Critical reflection involves questioning taken-for-granted assumptions (Anderson & Thorpe, 2004; Currie & Knights, 2003; Hay & Hodgkinson, 2008; Reynolds, 1999; Rigg & Trehan, 2008) and the notion of emancipation (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996) in the sense of being moved to see things differently (Carson & Fisher, 2006; Cunliffe, 2002, 2004; Raelin, 2007). However, examples of how to develop critical reflection are largely limited to on-campus teaching (Carson & Fisher, 2006; Currie & Knights, 2003; Hay

& Hodgkinson, 2008; Hedberg, 2009, Reynolds, 1999). Given the importance of critical reflection in management education and the growing demand for online learning, particularly in online communities that value difference and the democratic process of learning (Hodgson & Reynolds, 2005; Hodgson et al., 2012), we explore how management instructors perceive the notion of being critical, how this affects their facilitation of asynchronous discussions and the extent to which their practices and perception of their role promote or hinder the development of critical reflection.

This articul makes the following contributions; first, we respond to a call for more critical perspectives into online management instruction and instructors (Arbaugh et al., 2013). Second, we add to debates about improving asynchronous discussion in online management education (Comer & Lenaghan, 2013; Ivancevich et al., 2009; Rollag, 2010) by examining facilitation practices and how these may (or may not) lead to critical reflection. Third, drawing on critical perspectives in management education, we propose a more agentic role for instructors as facilitators in order to deliberately capitalise on opportunities to promote critical reflection that arise in asynchronous discussions.

The article is structured as follows; first we examine the notion of being critical in management education. We then review the dominant narrative around the facilitation of online learning communities and its impact on current understanding of the instructor's role before moving onto introducing our working understanding of online facilitation strategies to provide opportunities for emancipatory thinking and the instructor's agentic role which are informed by critical perspectives in management education. Findings from 18 interviews are then presented along with implications for research and practice. We conclude by offering recommendations for future research.

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Being 'Critical' in Management Education

Willmott's (1994) 'Provocations to a Debate' advocates making management education personally meaningful based on the insights generated by critical management academics. This focus on critical pedagogy, also inspired by Reed and Anthony (1992), crystallised around the notion of critical reflection (Reynolds, 1999) and later, reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2002). However, many definitions and explanations of these terms exist. Holmes et al. (2005) for example, frame being critical as suggesting a sense of questioning as in 'critical thinking' combined with Alvesson and Deetz's (2000) notion of critical theory which focuses on emancipating thinking and action through unmasking underlying tensions and meanings. Their approach is based on three principles; that students "question assumptions and taken-for-granted actions" (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 411), engage in *praxis* (Jun, 1994), and critique their understanding of values and culture (Holmes et al., 2005). They draw on the traditions of Critical Management Education (CME) to inform their framework, using the work of Cunliffe (2004) and Alvesson and Willmott's (1996) idea of micro-emancipation in which the prime purpose is to bring about change, allowing managers to critically question their taken-for-granted assumptions (Anderson & Thorpe, 2004; Currie & Knights, 2003; Hay & Hodgkinson, 2008; Rigg & Trehan, 2008) CME also seeks to inform a responsible and an ethical form of management practice (Cunliffe, 2004).

There are many ways of framing critical thinking in education that do not include an emancipatory element. Moon (2005, p.7) writes about how critical thinking involves working with complex ideas and using evidence to make a judgement whilst taking account of context. Mingers (2000) proposes that critical thinking involves the critique of rhetoric (arguments and propositions) and being sceptical of conventional wisdom, of one dominant view and of

information and knowledge. Critical thinking or being critical could also be focussed on improvement, enabling managers to identify ways to improve their work and create value more efficiently (Wallo et al., 2022). To promote this type of critical thinking, creative solutions can be found through questioning established definitions of a problem (Ellström, 2001; Walllo et al., 2022) where students reflectively think of the consequences of applying their solutions (Salem & Shields, 2011). Being critical can also involve critiquing established ideology, theory, text, or process (Cunliffe, 2002; Hibbert, 2013). However, a critical engagement with a text, others' worldviews or some established social structures as an external observer does not necessarily lead to micro-emancipation (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996), nor bring about changes in ways of being, acting or talking (Cunliffe, 2002). Hibbert (2013) explains that critical engagements which bring about a change are created through classroom disturbance and that the challenge for educators is to turn a reflective gaze (say on text or theory) inward, so that students begin to see how familiar ways of being and acting in the world are influenced by social structures and our interaction with it. This emancipatory thinking is said to be the basis of reflexivity in that it leads to the recognition of our own assumptions, and it is brought about by critical reflection on learners' own management lives leading to a change in the patterns of foundational assumptions (Hibbert, 2013).

In terms of facilitating reflexive engagements, emancipatory thinking and change are intrinsic to the process (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996) as is the ability to question the underlying assumptions of one's own actions and the impact of those actions. Several teaching approaches are proposed in the literature. A dialogical approach is favoured (Cunliffe, 2002, 2004) in that it allows students to hear themselves and others and potentially be 'struck' in the midst of those classroom discussions. Thus, 'being struck' is mobilised by a recognition of

how tacit assumptions influence the way we account for our practices and others' practices (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015). We then become critical in the sense that we emancipate ourselves (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996) or are moved to see things differently (Carson & Fisher, 2006; Cunliffe, 2002, 2004; Raelin, 2007) It is in this critical sense that management students' voices become actively engaged with others' worlds and views, and that their perspectives are broadened (Cunliffe, 2002, 2004). This sort of reflexivity and openness to others and otherness creates possibilities for students to change (Carson & Fisher, 2006; Raelin, 2007). Through classroom discussions, students' views are turned into 'critical voices' (Ellsworth, 1989) It is not just a mere voicing of students' experience in a self-affirming manner, rather acknowledging ways by which it is mediated by their and others' social positions (Ellsworth, 1989).

Whilst these ideas about critical reflection and reflexivity are widely accepted in the management education literature (see, for example Cunliffe, 2004; Hedberg, 2009; Hibbert, 2013; Reynolds, 1999) this does not mean that all management educators or instructors would share them as working definitions. The multiplicity of definitions of criticality in the literature means that instructors are unlikely to work with one accepted notion of what it means to be critical and will be influenced by their own reading and experience. We might expect to find a continuum of understandings from those who see being critical as questioning established understandings of a subject through to those who adopt a dialogical approach with the intention of enabling micro-emancipation.

Asynchronous Discussions in Online Learning Communities and the Instructor's Role

Research into online learning communities offers insights into the ways in which instructors facilitate asynchronous discussions particularly in relation to the Community of Inquiry (CoI)

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3 framework (Anderson et al., 2001; Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006). The CoI framework with its three elements, cognitive presence, teaching presence and social presence (Garrison et al., 2000) is the most frequently cited framework, often guiding the design of a facilitated asynchronous community (Arbaugh, 2000a, 2000b, 2008, 2014a, 2014b; Arbaugh et al., 2013; Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Soncin et al., 2022). To ensure effective learning takes place, discussion boards are integrated into classroom design (Shea et al., 2005), with clear parameters for students' interaction (Arbaugh, 2008). However, the way in which instructors guide and hone these discussions has a significant impact on learning outcomes.

Instructors are traditionally depicted as e-moderators (Salmon, 2012) or facilitators (Arbaugh, 2000a; Garrison et al., 2000; Richardson et al., 2016), particularly in online management education (Brower, 2003; Echambadi et al., 2022; Rollag, 2010; Shrivastava, 1999). In facilitating communities of inquiry, instructors encourage their students to find a resolution to a problem by adopting a questioning attitude (Garrison et al., 2000) and to challenge established definitions of a problem (Ellström, 2001). Much of what management educators know about becoming critical through asynchronous discussions is influenced by the idea that students are engaged in a staged process of inquiry which is triggered by a problem or a dilemma (Richardson & Ice, 2010; Szeto, 2015) and through which this problem is critically explored and resolved (Anderson et al. 2001; Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Garrison et al., 2000; Shea et al., 2005). Thus, being critical in the e-moderation sense, is about generating creative ideas or solutions to improve a problematic situation (Dewey, 1938; Garrison et al., 2000; Lipman, 2003) in the higher level of enquiry (Anderson et al., 2001; Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Shea et al., 2005; Szeto, 2015).

However, while a focus on improving a current situation enables managers to identify ways to improve their work and create value more efficiently (Wallo et al., 2022), it does not necessarily unsettle fundamental assumptions (Hibbert, 2013), or trigger a reflexive engagement with one's own lived experience (Cunliffe, 2004), resulting in a change.

A number of studies have addressed aspects of instructors' facilitation of asynchronous discussion within this context of improving a problematic situation (Anderson et al., 2000; Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Garrison at al., 2000; Garrison, 2006), with reports on resolution-directed enquiry being stalled at lower levels or not reaching the intended resolution (Anderson & Kanuka, 1998; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Garrison et al., 2001; Meyer, 2003). For instance, instructors are encouraged to keep discussions focused and on-track (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006), to summarise and to draw out less active participants (Garrison et al., 2000), resolve a conflict and find congruent linkages among opposing opinions (Anderson et al. 2001), and drive discussions towards a consensus and shared understanding (Garrison et al., 2000; Shea et al., 2005). Less common views of instructors' facilitation involves promoting a 'no-jump' rule (Comer & Lenaghan, 2012; Rollag, 2010) and a 'no-wisdom' dispensing attitude (Ramsey, 2003), and to limit intervention to correct inaccuracies (Brower, 2003). However, this 'hands-off' attitude is argued to be less effective, particularly where students feel reluctant to challenge other students' views (Guldberg & Pilkington, 2007).

The need to explore instructors' facilitation practices through an emancipatory thinking lens is heightened in light of the concerns voiced in the Networked Learning (NL) literature which challenge the unacknowledged social, cultural, and political dynamics or tensions embedded in the facilitation of online learning communities, and for which instructors must be prepared (Perriton & Reynolds, 2013). In particular, instructors need to be aware of how

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their practices could be forcing consensus and restricting marginalized discourses (Hodgson & Reynolds, 2005), and of dismissing issues in relation to power, voice, access, and inclusion (cf. Hodgson et al., 2012). NL encourages the design of pedagogies that value both difference and the democratic process of learning (Hodgson & Reynolds, 2005; Hodgson et al., 2012).

Recent research has shown that critical reflection in asynchronous discussions can involve a subtle form of emancipation that emerges accidentally from differences and in the absence of an instructor's intervention (Goumaa et al., 2019). This suggests that there is a missed opportunity for instructors to pick up on clues in students' posts (Goumaa et al., 2019), or as described by Ramsey (2014), to selectively attend to 'clues amid noise' to instigate emancipatory moments in classroom discussion. Others report that being reflective about one's own facilitation strategies (De Laat & Lally, 2003), making sense of classroom dynamics and making careful judgement about intervention into discussion (Perriton & Reynolds, 2013) are crucial, yet not directly observable aspects of instructor's facilitation. However, while NL advocates an alternative approach to facilitation, one that is deliberate and more tension-conscious, the implications for an instructor's practice have not yet been fully explored. Our research is concerned with how instructors' framings of criticality might influence facilitation practices that could encourage students to become more critical.

Facilitation Strategies and Critical Management Education

Elements of the CME literature such as critical reflection and emancipatory thinking are useful as a lens through which to understand an instructor's practice in asynchronous discussions. Prompts and provocations are often used by management educators to create disturbance (Hibbert, 2013) and to unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions and worldviews (Cunliffe, 2004). For instance, Hibbert and Cunliffe (2015) propose exposing students to troublesome

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and unfamiliar knowledge to induce shifts in their thinking. Anderson and Thorpe (2004) report that introducing unfamiliar language and concepts to classroom discussions can also disrupt students' worldview. Disturbance can also take place naturally due to classroom diversity, resulting in power, culture, or gender clashes. Working through such dynamics, rather than avoiding it, allows educators to exploit clashes to disrupt students' comfortable viewpoints (Hibbert, 2013). Cunliffe (2004) advocates a subjective understanding of reality or multiple realities which students are encouraged to question. Engaging students with others and otherness happens in a responsive, democratic classroom dialogue (Cunliffe, 2002) in a way that allows for the "creative interaction of contradictory and different voices" (Raelin, 2008, p.521), and with an acceptance that there are no ' right' or 'wrong' answers (Currie & Knights, 2003). However, developing a classroom environment of pluralism (Currie & Knights, 2003) and a pedagogy of difference requires management educators not only to resist "the familiar pull to consensus and conformity" (Reynolds & Trehan, 2001, p.366) but to encourage different views to examine one's own in a way that reflects Ellsworth's (1989) notion of critical voices. Furthermore, Perriton and Reynolds (2004) propose challenging a position of 'intellectual authority' that is reinforced through assessment procedures while Carson and Fisher (2006) argue that educators need to model being critical, and Fenwick (2005) suggests problematising students' stories.

Some argue that considering fresh ways of thinking is mobilised in the online classroom through the expression of doubt and disagreement (Hay et al., 2004). A study of asynchronous discussions in an online MBA found evidence of emancipatory thinking in instances where a disagreement leads students to critically reflect on their own social contexts or "different (heteroglot) backgrounds" (Goumaa et al., 2019, p.237). Thus, an instructor's strategy in cases

where students disagree with each and their own working definitions of being critical are important factors affecting critical reflection in the online classroom.

Drawing on critical perspectives on management education, it could be argued that providing students with opportunities for truly critical reflection requires instructors to move beyond the CoI notion of facilitation (cf. Arbaugh, 2000a; Garrison et al., 2000; Richardson et al., 2015, 2016) and to embrace these ideas from CME. It appears clear that online instructors are expected to make thoughtful interventions, pick up on clues in students' posts, encourage them to draw on their lived experiences while recognising conflicting values, and pay attention to issues that can affect classroom dynamics such as power, gender, or culture.

Potential Challenges to Facilitating Critical Reflection Online

Echambadi et al. (2022) report on the challenge imposed by classroom design in large-scale online programmes, specifically the degree of structure and control which restricts instructors' freedom to engage critically and deeply with students' posts. Not only does critical reflection facilitation require an instructor's deliberate intervention (Carson & Fisher, 2006; Cunliffe, 2004; Gray, 2007) but should also be purposefully built into classroom design (Hedberg, 2009; Hibbert, 2013). For instance, making space for emancipatory moments to occur requires reducing the amount of content delivered (Hedberg, 2009), introducing critical writing that leads students to question structures and systems and their role in maintaining them (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2013), and a consistent use of critical perspectives to underpin the design of programmes (Antonacopoulou, 2010). However, this can be problematic, particularly where some HE institutions do not involve instructors in online classroom design (Echambadi et al., 2022), which means that instructors may not have complete control over online content along with a requirement to strictly adhere to a rigorous rubric and a

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predefined set of classroom management policies (Echambadi et al., 2022). Having a pre-defined curriculum with set readings and prescribed assessments, activities, and learning objectives can pose challenges to instructors who are required to facilitate content that was designed by someone else (Richardson et al., 2015). The degree of built-in structure and rigidity into classroom design is an important issue for two reasons; first, in the context of ongoing debate around quality in online management education against scalability (Soncin et al., 2022) and second, the scepticism around the impact of an overly rigid structure on the potential to create dialogue between instructors and their students (Ivancevich et al., 2009). Another challenge is the lack of preparedness. Educators can experience anxiety themselves which influences their teaching practice (Vince, 2010) and particularly when expected ways of teaching are not adhered to. This can be alleviated by offering support to novice instructors through mentoring and training (Ivancevich et al., 2009; Mitchell et al., 2015; Shrivastava, 1999) and specifically in relation to integrating technology with pedagogy (Echambadi et al., 2022).

There are also added pressures in terms of workload and time availability. Some speculate that online teaching takes double or triple the time of traditional on-campus teaching (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). A high quantity of students' posts requires an overwhelming time commitment to read and assess them, making it challenging for instructors to keep up with classroom conversations (Rollag, 2010). Some have suggested a structured approach to address this issue. This includes being explicit about expectations, with respect to posts' format, quantity, quality, and frequency (Comer & Lenaghan, 2013); developing a structured plan to guide facilitation and limiting the time spent online by having instructors specify how often and when they intend to check the discussion board (Rollag, 2010). However, having a quota system to regulate the number of posts and a fixed schedule for instructors' interactions may

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reduce the quality and spontaneity of conversations (Rollag, 2010), which may lead to less thoughtful interventions.

Our three research questions are prompted by the existing literature on online learning communities and the lack of writing about alternative approaches to asynchronous discussion facilitation that have an espoused critical and emancipatory intent. In particular, we explore the positions instructors take on criticality, and its influence on their approaches to engage students in critical reflection. This is against the backdrop of the scarcity of evidence on the prevalence of critical reflection in online settings compared to the face-to-face classroom. Our study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do management instructors in an online MBA programme understand being critical in relation to students' engagement in asynchronous discussions?

2. How do management instructors develop critical reflection through asynchronous discussions?

3. What are the particular impediments (and enablers) to developing critical reflection in this online MBA programme?

Method

The online programme studied here was, at the time of the data collection, one of the largest online MBAs in the UK with 1600 students. The espoused pedagogy of the programme is based on engendering critical reflection through facilitated asynchronous discussions and students are obliged to participate as part of their assessment. None of the instructors had been involved in programme or curriculum design. They teach modules that typically last eight weeks, to a fixed and pre-defined curriculum that has a set topic for each week and also

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assess 'Discussion Questions' to which students must first post a written response and then respond to others' posts by asking questions, adding opinions, accounts of their own experiences, information, and further references. Students are instructed to engage with each other's posts over at least three days. Each module (section) normally has between 18 and 25 students and one instructor. Students are introduced to the idea of being critical in the first module: "In this module … you will examine the concept of 'the critically reflexive practitioner' (Cunliffe, 2004) and assess how the concepts of critical thinking and critical reflection support graduate learning" (Excerpt from Module 1 syllabus).

Research Method

Using a purposeful sampling strategy, we invited 27 participants out of a pool of approximately 50. Our invitation was sent only to instructors with at least 3 years' experience of teaching online and who taught on any one of the 4 core modules. Eighteen instructors (15 men and 3 women) agreed to take part in our study. Our sample reflected instructors with a diverse range of subject-discipline backgrounds.

All 18 participants had undergone compulsory online training that takes place prior to teaching their first class in the online MBA and 3 of them had been responsible for the delivery of this training and had mentored new instructors. The programme is delivered in conjunction with a specialist online learning provider who builds and manages the online learning platform and co-delivers instructors' mentoring and training alongside other administration and management tasks. During the intensive 4-week online training period, instructors are introduced to concepts such Garrison's (2000) CoI model and Salmon's (2012) 'e-moderation'. The latter provides the structure for instruction, offering a means of initially socializing learners into an online environment before moving onto exchanging information and

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constructing knowledge (Salmon, 2012). Instructors are also introduced to the online learning platform (Blackboard), and the institutional policies regarding assessment and expected level of their engagement. When teaching their first class, instructors are matched with a mentor who supervises and guides them over different weeks of the module (Week 1, Week 2, Week 5, and Week 7). Following successful completion of their first online teaching experience, instructors are assigned more classes to teach.

On average, our participants have 5 years of online teaching experience. While none of the participants teaches on the university's campus, all but one have experience of teaching both online and face-to-face on campus. There were five participants for whom online teaching is a career and are working full-time for one or more online HE providers and 13 who work part-time and carry out online teaching that fits in with their main employment commitment in their own university.

Data Collection

Data were collected through 18 semi-structured interviews. The interviews were carried out over a 5-month period before Covid19 and conducted by both authors individually. Different environments were used to host the interviews with the majority choosing an online environment as opposed to face-to-face for convenience. The duration of interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 50 minutes. The initial invitation email stated clearly that participation in this study is completely voluntary and that their participation (or nonparticipation) does not affect their current positions or contracts. All interviews were recorded after obtaining written consent from each participant.

This semi-structured format allowed us to explore understandings of critical reflection, facilitation practices, and classroom design challenges while providing us with the flexibility

to amend our questions based on the issues or topics brought up by our participants. For instance, the majority of our instructors referred to critical reflection as *criticality* or *being critical* and we resorted to the use of these terms interchangeably in our questions to reflect their understanding. Early participants also brought up issues in relation to the assessment regime and workload during the interviews and we subsequently incorporated questions to cover this if it was not brought up naturally in the conversation. The interview guide can be found in Appendix B.

Data Analysis Strategy

We used the template method (King, 2012) to organise and code data from the 18 interview transcripts. Each interview was first coded by one author and then reviewed by the other. We discussed the template codes through a back-and-forth process until a final template comprising of three first-level themes was agreed, reflecting our three research questions (see Appendix A). This meant revisiting the template, allowing for changes and for our deductive coding scheme to be refined inductively as well. For instance, first-level themes were inductively refined, added, or deleted (King, 2012). Our initial template included four first-level themes (i.e. Perception of Being Critical, Facilitation Technique, Enablers of Critical Reflection, and Impediments to Critical Reflection). Following King's (2012) hierarchical coding, Perception of Being Critical was succeeded by two second-level themes: *critical thinking* and *critical reflection*. However, and as informed by data, our coding progressed by focusing attention on the specific ways by which instructors perceived their students as being critical which led us to replace these two second-level themes by the three second-level themes of *examine theory*, *bring plurality of perspectives,* and *question assumptions and politics.* This enabled us to clearly see the variation in instructors' perceptions. Similarly, the

first-level theme Facilitation Technique was replaced by Discussion Facilitation. We found that the theme was too narrowly defined and did not allow us to capture the differences among instructors with respect to the ways they perceived the motivation and purpose behind having a classroom discussion, and its impact on their facilitation practices. As such, the first-level theme Discussion Facilitation was succeeded by three second-level themes (i.e. *questioning technique, motivation*, and *allowing disagreement).* This final theme corresponds to a question we asked about what they would do if they found students disagreeing over an issue on the discussion board. Working through our interviews, we realised that there were other prompts or cues in the data that suggest missed opportunities for enabling critical reflection. This was closely linked to the constraints imposed by instructors' perceptions of their role and the value of lived experiences to students' learning. We attempted to include perception of the role, and student experience as first-level themes. However, we decided that it would be clearer if all factors that influenced instructors' Discussion Facilitation were placed under one first-level theme. This meant that the first-level theme Discussion Facilitation is now succeeded by a total of five second-level themes (i.e. *questioning technique, motivation*, *allowing disagreement, perception of role, and student experience)* (see Appendix A).

Our initial template also included a fourth, descriptive first-level theme (King, 2012) (i.e. Enablers of Critical Reflection), which was meant to list the factors that instructors perceive as enabling the facilitation of critical reflection through asynchronous discussions. On reflection, it became apparent that this might be misleading given the paucity of interpretations that linked being critical to emancipating thinking. We, therefore, omitted this code.

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Findings

Diverse (mis)Interpretations

Our analysis identified that there was no one shared understanding of critical reflection. Three interpretations emerged during our interviews. The first, most common interpretation identified being critical in terms of questioning theoretical assumptions using real life experience or practices. As shown from the quotes below, instructors expected students to read the teaching material, and to question the assumptions of theory (Cunliffe, 2002; Hibbert, 2013) in real life contexts:

“Critical thinking is reading the material and seeing how this can become a real-life example … How could I take that into practice … they are taking the(discussion) question … to see how it would fit in their lives.”

(Participant M, Operations Management)

“If we are technical and look at the rate applied (from a finance model) in one country and see how would it apply … is it reliable? how does it work in real life? so even when you are looking at the calculation you have to question it.”

(Participant MH, Accounting and Finance)

“If I ask you to critically analyse the ideas of Porter in relation to corporate strategy, I expect you to be able to read Porter’s article and come back to me and relate the concept to your own organisation.”

(Participant S, Strategy)

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"Questioning the way the theory is developed and structured … to understand why this theory is good or bad and whether it works or not."

(Participant MC, Finance and Economics)

For those instructors, the "depth of experience to draw from" (Participant DS, Finance and Management) was perceived as crucial to becoming critical. The second most common interpretation of being critical is related to the notion of pluralism (Morrell & Learmonth, 2015), promoting 'no right or wrong answers' (Currie & Knights, 2003):

"It (criticality) is the ability to be able to … get an understanding from a range of perspectives and … to be able to suggest that you think one approach is more appropriate and why … but not just accept."

(Participant P, HRM and Strategy)

"This is brought together in terms of several ideas at the same time …they are able to compare and contrast, and challenge …they don't take all they are given and accept it as it is."

(Participant SH, Marketing)

Three of our participants use words and phrases that reflect an engagement with ideas that reinforces a subjective understanding of reality (Cunliffe, 2004), questioning own assumptions (Anderson & Thorpe, 2004; Reynolds, 1999: Rigg & Trehan, 2008) and acknowledging the role social structures and politics play in shaping decisions and practices:

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"…. (Criticality) is the ability to step back ... think about things from a different perspective …look at your own assumptions and question if they are correct … to have an open mind on what other people have said."

(Participant C, HRM and Management)

"… get an understanding of people('s) different constructions of reality … having the emotional intelligence to know there are lots of different ways to look at this even when what we might see as an obvious sensible solution, we are actually dealing with people and people are not always sensible …politics plays a big part in many of the decisions that are made."

(Participant PL, Strategic Management, HRM and Marketing)

Student's Voice and Cues in Text

Our findings suggest that instructors provided a safe and personally relevant learning space for students to voice their questions, share experiences, and build an argument. The statements below indicate an appreciation of students' voices in this sense:

"…the way you (as a student) do this is by starting with your own voice, so yes I want to see them bring in their own questions and examples."

(Participant CG, Management, and HRM)

"….is it solid theoretically? did you provide a relevant example? did you make your argument? I don't have to agree with it but was I convinced that what you were saying was true … Then I am looking for that original voice."

(Participant DS, Finance and Management)

There was a general appreciation of the learning gained from students' life experiences, cultures and contexts (Cunliffe, 2002), particularly, as indicated by Participant DT, where management experience was used to prompt discussions:

"Tutors can also learn from students who have a lot of experience in industry and if they are from a different country or a different culture, they may bring a different process."

(Participant MC, Accounting and Finance, and Economics)

"… I learn so much from those who are willing to share, there are things you can do to draw out the information but if someone does provide some experience it will provide the needed to prompt additional discussion."

(Participant DT, Marketing)

Interestingly, there was a mention of emotions and tones being picked up by two instructors, who had over 5 years of online teaching experience, in a way that echoes Ramsey's (2014) idea of 'clues amid noise', and which were used to compensate for the absence of visual cues and body language:

"I have found over the years, like blind people develop an acute sense of hearing, I have learnt to pick up far more colours and tones and nuances in what students write to compensate for the fact that I can't see them face-to-face. I can now almost tell what emotional state they are in regardless of the fact I have never and will never see them."

(Participant SH, Project Management)

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"I see feelings in the writing, I see characters, and this does not happen on ground (on-campus) …not only the knowledge and experience."

(Participant M, Operations Management)

Asynchronous Discussion Facilitation

Instructors described their role in a number of different ways suggesting predominant perceptions of their roles as a facilitator (Garrison et al., 2001) and a community builder (Comer & Lenaghan, 2012; Rollag, 2010):

"Summarise the thoughts of everyone and draw a conclusion."

(Participant J, Accounting and Finance)

"Help them understand what is behind the (discussion) question."

(Participant M, Operations and Management)

"Pull them back." (if discussion goes off track)

(Participant P, Marketing and Management)

"Make sure no posts are without comments."

(Participant SK, Strategy and Marketing)

"Create an atmosphere of a learning community."

(Participant K, Strategy and Marketing)

Instructors appear to have developed their own facilitation approach *intuitively* and *tacitly*. While our analysis identified the development of a diverse range of practices that instructors believed were essential to support collaborative learning (Brower, 2003), the majority used more of a Socratic, questioning technique for different purposes:

"Provoke debates."

(Participants P, Marketing and Management)

"Lead it (discussion) into a new dimension or area."

(Participant K, Marketing and Strategic Management)

"Encourage criticality."

(Participant SH, Project Management)

"Constantly engage the class."

(Participant J, Accounting and Finance)

Our data shows that for those few instructors who perceived being critical as challenging one's own assumptions the Socratic style was either a deliberate, structured approach or a more spontaneous, in-the-moment attempt. The latter approach, as shown in the quote below, appears to be relational, engaging students with new areas or perspectives:

"... depending on what is generated by the discussions in class, we will go into a new area and that will then prompt me to ask more questions to give them more learning opportunities, and that will take me into a different part of the class that I hadn't anticipated."

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(Participant CG, Management and HRM)

We also see below an example of a deliberate and describable form of questioning or problematising students' stories (Fenwick, 2005):

"I try to be the first one to make a comment and I try to ask 3-4 questions … and then I try to be passive … Usually we will start slowly, and some students will post things which are very short …I try to be very particular in my questions to be able to open up debate and then I will question them on their assumptions."

(Participant MH, Accounting and Finance)

Differences, Debates, and Clashes

Guided by critical perspectives of management education (e.g. Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Reynolds & Trehan, 2001) and issues raised in networked learning with respect to differences, controversy and debate (Hodgson et al., 2012; Hodgson & Reynold, 2005), we specifically asked instructors about what they do in instances where students disagree with one another. As one instructor put it, disagreements or debates were perceived "healthy" in classrooms discussions (Cunliffe 2002, 2009):

"Most of the time it is healthy, and you can take advantage of it … you would jump in and say we have this and this, and then you can bring in the literature and show what has been found, and how often that is found and what is still (to) be researched."

(Participant M, Operations Management)

However, as the quotes below reveal, instructors limited their intervention (Brower, 2003; Ramsey, 2003) to expanding on the theoretical talk, setting the tone and encouraging respect, if need be:

"…you only come in when you realise there is a particular force (issue) that the entire group is not getting right."

(Participant K, Marketing and Strategy)

"…there are some people who are getting aggressive, and they might have a strong point of view and there is a clash going on, …, for some reason there are people who don't get on and so it can get heated."

(Participant SK, Strategy and Marketing)

Instructors described disagreements as relatively uncommon, usually confined to "I respectfully disagree" or a similar statement (Participant DS, Finance and Management) due to the fact that the "window for discussion is so short" (Participant SH, Project Management). The overly tight management controls and assessment regimen, which seem to compensate for the absence of visual cues and body language, appear to have created a fast-paced learning environment where students are pressured to finish off and move onto the next task. Eventually, this has led debates to be 'mild', restricting students from fully exploiting the learning potential of these moments:

"…I see it (disagreement) less because of the constraints of the design of the online classrooms … more constraints (are needed) …because we cannot see each other, but that doesn't mean we have to have more rules in place because I think that the more barriers we have online actually prevent students from learning at the pace that they could."

(Participant CG, Management and HRM)

Interestingly, there were also a few unprompted references to the combined effect of what was deemed to be acceptable behaviour by some students and the instructor's expectations of online etiquette which could explain the lack of deep discussion and debate. Consistent with previous studies' reporting on the challenge some students experience in distinguishing between the acceptable practice of critiquing and challenging others' assumptions and that of engaging in unacceptable personal criticism (cf. Currie & Knights, 2003), instructors reported that culture hinders expressing disagreement with other worldviews:

"In some cultures, students feel that it is rude to disagree … Once students in a class get to know each other, they do not want to rock the boat by criticising."

(Participant SH, Project Management)

Our analysis also revealed that there were opportunities for debate around issues of ethics, power, politics, and gender equality that were not taken up by instructors in the way in which Reynolds and Trehan (2001) suggest that they should. The issue of power relations based on gender was brought up by three instructors who reported on the experience of having some male students feel that it is legitimate to deride the contributions of their female co-learners in a way in which they would not question their perceived equals:

"There are gender clashes if certain students think that they are superior because of their gender and other students should be subservient."

(Participant P, Marketing and Management)

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Instructors appeared to take on an overly polite attitude, which drove a general acceptance of the status quo rather than a potentially rich opportunity to provoke critical reflection through asynchronous discussions. We see in the quotes below how this cautious approach was reinforced by two factors; a perception that these *teachable moments* deviate from the learning outcomes which led them to being dismissed, and a wariness of what instructors themselves communicate under the watchful eye of quality monitors:

"…what you want to avoid is for it (discussions) to go off track and it can very easily if it is a sensitive topic like the role of women in the workplace that can go haywire really fast and you want to avoid that situation."

(Participant S, Strategy)

"… I am carefully conscious … that you can run into situations …the political and democratic reality in some countries and you have to be very careful about this … we also run into talking about ethics and businesses … they (students) are talking about practices which are clearly not ethical … we have to be careful. I mean even in our classes it will be monitored by someone."

(Participant DS, Finance and Management)

Workload and Management Control

Maintaining controls is clearly a feature of ensuring quality in this online MBA. However, our analysis reveals that, creating multiple assessments along with restricting discussions to only pre-set questions to guide weekly interactions and a tight posting schedule meant that

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instructors spend a long time assessing students' work and as a result, as shown in the quotes below, are effectively losing autonomy in their classrooms:

"… because of the reputation (of the HEI that) exists … you have to create lots of checks and controls … but what that does is it restricts creativity and prevents the instructor from having complete control of the class."

(Participant P, Marketing and Management)

"I would much prefer… to insert my own questions which are much shorter and more interested in the student's voice, experience and ideas …my hands are tied a bit …there is a dichotomy between what I would like to assess and what the university want me to assess …we have standards (controls) but I think standards get in the way of learning that is what I am trying to say."

(Participant CG, Management and HRM)

As two instructors described to us, it can take up to 15 hours a day online with an average of 8 hours spent grading per week. For students, as discussed earlier, it is reasonable to assume that tight controls meant that they were left with less time to probe deep into ideas and experiences shared on the discussion boards.

Discussion

Our findings revealed that instructors' facilitation of asynchronous discussions promoted learning that is personally relevant and a learning environment that is democratic in which students can comfortably share their views and experiences (Comer & Lenaghan, 2013). For example, instructors valued reflections on management practice and experience (Cunliffe, 2002), encouraged multiple perspectives (Currie & Knights, 2003), perceived debates as a

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healthy indicator of students' learning (Cunliffe, 2009), and avoided forcing a consensus (Hodgson & Reynolds, 2005; Reynolds & Trehan, 2001). In relatively few instances, they picked up on emotions, tones, and characters in text, beyond the focal message (Ramsey, 2014). However, instructors' facilitation practices appeared to be constrained by their varied (and often limited) perceptions of what constitutes being critical. Reading hidden emotions (Allen & Vince, 2006) in students' posts can shape the possibilities and limitations of discussions yet this was often ignored. The wide variation in instructors' understandings of being critical impedes the potential of asynchronous discussions to promote critical reflection. For example, instructors created an environment of pluralism and difference (Currie & Knights, 2003) which they believed helpful to gain an understanding from a range of perspectives. What appears to be missing is encouraging a *reflexive understanding* where students exploit these other and different perspectives to examine their own perspective (Hibbert, 2013). The majority of instructors perceived being critical as taking a critical stance toward theory to understand why a theory is good or bad in the sense of whether or not it works. Their practice was not influenced by the anti-performative narrative in management education, that is, bringing about change by challenging existing social structures (Spicer et al., 2009). Hibbert (2013) describes how teachers should facilitate the process of enabling student's reflexivity both outwardly and inwardly; outwardly by beginning to see the social structures that influence ways of being and acting, and inwardly by beginning to see these structures at play in oneself. Only three instructors explained being critical in a way that is consistent with the prime purpose of critical reflection, which is bringing about change through questioning and acknowledging the role of social structures in shaping one's own assumptions (Anderson & Thorpe, 2004; Cunliffe, 2004; Reynolds, 1999: Rigg & Trehan, 2008). Instructors spoke about the value of engaging students' voices in classroom discussions and

feeling comfortable enough to bring their own questions and examples. However, simply voicing one's ideas does not engender reflexivity and emancipatory thinking. This could be achieved by prompting students to focus on how different voices and opinions are mediated social positions (Ellsworth, 1989).

Antonacopoulou (2010) notes that critical pedagogy needs to be reinforced consistently throughout the whole programme, but this was not the case here. In our study, unless instructors have some knowledge of critical reflection and critical pedagogy or teach on the first module which sets out the critical intent of the programme, terms like being critical and critical reflection were widely open to individual interpretation. As a result, being critical in asynchronous discussions became widely associated with the questioning of theory, ideas or rhetoric (Mingers , 2000) and the notion of pluralism (Morrell & Learmonth, 2015). This raises questions about the extent to which the critical intent of the programme designers is carried through to instructors' facilitation.

The absence of a critical text should not preclude instructors from taking a clear critical stance (Fenwick, 2005) when facilitating asynchronous discussions, but instructors were reluctant to provoke disturbance online in the sense described by Hibbert (2013). Hodgson et al. (2016) advocate that on-campus teaching practices can be sustained online whereas others believe that on-campus techniques cannot be simply transferred into online classrooms (De Laat et al., 2007). This study shows that these online instructors facilitate their classrooms in a way that largely avoids the creation of threads that are likely to go 'off topic' because of a packed curriculum and the fact that their teaching quality is observed by monitors who appear to watch, record, and assess their activities in a form of panoptic online surveillance (Campbell & Carson, 2002).

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The amount of time required to teach and meet students' expectations is a commonly reported cause of instructors' struggles (Bailey & Card, 2009), and often a source of resistance to online teaching (Mitchell et al., 2015). Our instructors spoke of an average of 8 hours spent grading per week, which leaves them with limited time to pick up on clues in students' posts, delicately address classroom tensions, or even reflect and interrogate their understanding of classroom dynamics and their own habitual frames of reference (De Laat & Lally, 2003; Perriton & Reynolds, 2013) all of which are important in creating critically reflective classroom discussions.

This restricted freedom and management control such as the tight posting schedule (Comer & Lenaghan, 2012) could be argued to maintain the consistency and quality in large-scale programmes (Echambadi et al., 2022). However, this might not always be the case; in an MBA programme with a focus on practice and engendering critical reflection, tight controls reduce the possibilities of thoughtful interventions or the ability to probe ideas and lived experiences. One instructor, torn between wanting to assess and explore interesting elements of students' posts and identifying the prescribed items of assessment, felt that their "hands *were* tied". Instructors may find themselves caught up in situations where pursuing their own critical approach to discussion facilitation means that they fail to comply with the institution's policies.

Such controls appear to limit the autonomy and time an instructor needs to instigate spontaneous discussions (Rollag, 2010) that veer away from prescribed weekly learning objectives. This spontaneity capitalises on differences and creates teachable moments and opportunities for critical reflection. This has led students, who are caught up in a tight posting schedule and a fast-paced learning environment, to engage only superficially in debates and

disagreements, not having the time to exploit taken-for-granted issues that may have moral and ethical implications (Cunliffe, 2002, 2004). Our data confirms Palloff and Pratt's (2007) observation that online teaching is particularly onerous in comparison to on-campus teaching and Rollag's (2010) finding that reading numerous student posts involves a heavy time commitment. However, we also found that the controls put in place by this particular HEI led to a superficial engagement in critical debates.

We found that instructors' perceptions of their role and facilitation practices appear to be largely influenced by the existing literature on e-moderation (Salmon, 2012) and facilitation (Arbaugh, 2000; Brower, 2003; Echambadi et al., 2022; Rollag, 2010), introduced during their training. For instance, instructors talked about summarising thoughts on the discussion boards (Garrison et al., 2000), building a community (Anderson et al., 2001), and pulling students back on track whenever necessary (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006). However, accounts of their role and facilitation practices were not influenced by some of the critical texts in management education such as Cunliffe's (2004) critically reflexive practitioner or Alvesson and Willmott's (1996) micro-emancipation. Furthermore, instructors' facilitation practices were more likely to be associated with an unquestioned overly polite online etiquette, an attitude of conflict-avoidance and a 'hands-off' approach in moments of disagreement. Contrary to Holmes et al.'s (2005) view, instructors avoided the discomfort that existed in the classroom. This leads to a deliberate or unconscious sidelining of issues that can create disturbance in asynchronous discussions, such as business practices that are unethical and gender inequality fuelled by a perception of superiority, and in doing so negate the potential of the culturally diverse online classroom as a site for critical reflection.

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Our findings suggest that instructors could adopt a more agentic role and that a deliberate approach to facilitation should be thoughtfully crafted to capitalise on opportunities to promote critical reflection.

Implications for Practice

There are several ways in which discussions that lead to critical reflection in the online classroom can be created and encouraged. First, there needs to be an acknowledgement that it is not feasible to simply transplant practices from the physical classroom to the online environment. This should start with the design of programmes, and we suggest that the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 2000) could be imbued with an emancipatory intent by intentionally positioning instructors as responsible for creating dialogical opportunities (Cunliffe, 2001) that might trigger arresting moments (Shotter, 1996). The role of the instructor becomes more “engaged than distant” (Elliott & Reynolds, 2002, p.520) and they are directed to ask “serious, critical questions” (Grey & Mitev, 1995, p.86). In terms of curriculum design, it becomes crucial to ensure consistency of purpose and voice in online teaching materials and especially where instructors are not involved in the design of online programmes and are mainly delivering content designed by others.

We propose that training for online instructors takes a practice-based approach as advocated by Hodgson et al. (2016) and includes some of the overlooked areas that we have identified in our study. These include principles of respecting diversity and promoting democracy (Hodgson & Reynolds, 2005) and the role of emotions, power, and politics (Rigg & Trehan, 2004) in enabling and constraining critical reflection in asynchronous learning environments. Marx et al. (2016, p.500) argued that the absence of “pedagogical training” acts as a disservice

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to both faculty and students. We take this further and suggest that there is a need to ensure that the training that instructors undergo is adequately aligned with the espoused pedagogy.

Conclusion

The article builds on previous work in relation to the use of asynchronous discussion in online management education (Comer & Lenaghan, 2013; Ivancevich et al., 2009; Rollag, 2010) with a particular focus on the instructor's role in developing critical reflection. Our findings reveal more impediments than enablers of the facilitation of critical reflection in the asynchronous learning environment. In particular, we have highlighted instructors' lack of understanding of the programme's critical intent which allowed a diversity of perceptions of what it means to be critical to flourish. This led to a plethora of facilitation practices and an inconsistent use of critical questioning throughout the programme. Although our instructors underwent rigorous training, this did not include an engagement with the espoused critical pedagogy of the programme. Coupled with a tightly controlled learning environment, this led to the suppression of potentially critically reflective discussions.

Our findings from this research address concerns that online learning can be uni-directional and lacking in critical discussion. In particular, we have illustrated that online learning is not necessarily inferior to a face-to-face experience and that instructors are using a variety of ways to engage students in meaningful dialogue. However, just as in the on-campus classroom, instructors are using their own practical theories of how to do this.

These insights indicate various opportunities for future research. Firstly, we renew Arbaugh et al.'s (2013) call for more critical perspectives into the study of online management instruction and instructors. We also propose that future studies could examine facilitation

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practices from a larger sample of instructors and across different programme designs, perhaps where instructors actively contribute to curriculum content and programme design, and where synchronous discussion is integral to classroom design. Whilst this study identifies impediments that pertain to the imposed design features of a large-scale programme, further research could explore impediments and enablers of critical reflection in less structured, small-scale online management programmes. Whilst our study has examined instructors' perceptions of their own facilitation practices, it would be interesting to understand how students experience these different forms of teaching and the impact on their learning. Finally, we suggest that there is an opportunity to develop a pedagogy of critical online facilitation that builds on the philosophical stance of CME and provides a set of guiding principles for practice.

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Appendix (A)

Final Template – With Themes Definitions

1. Perception of Being Critical (C)
1.1. Examine Theory (C/T): Questioning theory and its applicability to practise in different contexts (i.e. cultures, industries, organisations …etc.)
1.2. Bring Plurality of Perspectives (C/PP): Ability to bring in different perspectives in relation to a topic or theory, comparing and contrasting for the purpose of validation
1.3. Question Assumptions and Politics (C/AP)
2. Discussion Facilitation (F)
2.1. Questioning Technique (F/QT): Socratic, questioning technique to facilitate online classroom discussion
2.1.1. Deliberate planned approach (F/QT/D): Instructors have a structured plan about when and what questions to post in the discussion forum
2.1.2. Unplanned approach (F/QT/U): Instructors deploy in-the-moment Socratic style to promote the questioning of the taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom
2.2. Motivation (F/M)
2.2.1. Debate (F/M/D): To introduce a different perspective to the classroom discussion
2.2.2. New area (F/M/NA): To direct classroom discussion to new unexplored areas
2.2.3. Get on board (F/M/GoB): To draw inactive students to classroom discussion who would otherwise not participate

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2.3. Allowing Disagreements (F/AD): Instructors allow disagreement but intervene only to set the tone, clarify, or expand academic concepts and ideas, and encourage respect if things got very heated
2.4. Perception of Role (F/I)
2.4.1. Classroom moderator (F/I/CM): Instructors perceive their role as helping with understanding the requirements of a discussion question, getting discussions back on track, acknowledging students' contributions, and creating an atmosphere of an online learning community
2.4.2. Co-learner (F/I/L): Instructors perceive themselves as co-learners with their students, learning how things get done in different cultural contexts through the experiences their students bring to classroom discussions
2.5. Student Experience (F/EX)
2.5.1. Voicing (F/EX/V): Students' voicing of views, opinions and examples from own experience
2.5.2. Emotions (F/EX/E): Instructors' ability to read hidden emotions in posts, beyond focal message
2.5.3. Learning (F/EX/L): Instructors learn from student experience and cultural contexts
3. Challenges to Critical Reflection (CCR)
3.1. Student Cultural Norms (CCR/CN): Students believe that it is inappropriate to disagree or criticise because it is against their cultural norms

3.2. Instructor Online Etiquette (CCR/ET): Instructor's taken-for-granted assumption and concerns about politeness, adopting a less interventionist approach in disagreements interfered with the nature of online learning
3.3. Management Control (CCR/MC): Instructor's feelings of unempowered, not in control of their teachings
3.4. Workload and Assessment Regimen (CCR/WK): Strict and tighter posting schedule and crowded assessment regimen leave students with limited time to probe deep into experiences and views

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Appendix (B)

Interview Guide

1. How long have you been a teacher whether online or on-campus?
2. Which modules do you teach online?
3. In your opinion, how do online students learn?
4. What does 'being critical' through asynchronous discussions mean to you?
5. What do you do to facilitate criticality through weekly discussions?
6. What do you look for when assessing students' discussion posts?
7. What would be a good online learning experience in your opinion?
8. What do you do if you find your students are disagreeing over an issue on the discussion board?
9. What do you think of the current assessment regime?
10. What do you think of the workload?