Anonymity in online discussion forums – does it promote connections?

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study of pre-registration undergraduate nursing and midwifery students' perceptions of the facility to post and read anonymous messages in closed-member University-hosted online forums. Two online focus groups and seven semi-structured interviews were conducted. Nine themes were identified, revealing wide contrasts between students' experience, understanding of and ability to use online anonymity. While the benefits of anonymity were accepted, most interviewees feared the clumsily-worded anonymous comments which so easily spark unpleasant exchanges. Allowing anonymity may open the forum up to these problems, especially considering, from a digital literacies perspective, that the students have such varied backgrounds. But allowing anonymity brings an online forum closer in resemblance to those outside university, i.e. which provided an authentic site for the more experienced students to gain their digital literacy. With clarity in the degree of anonymity, and sensitive moderation of errant messages, allowing the anonymous option could help less digitally experienced students catch up with their peers who cannot do without it.

Keywords

Anonymity, online research methods, discussion boards, student perceptions, promoting connections, digital literacies, networked learning, online pedagogy

Introduction

The Internet has facilitated anonymous communications for many decades, offering participants opportunities to experiment with their identity and projected selves behind a veil of text-only communication (Turkle, 1997).

Depending on the software, academic staff who use online forums in their courses have the option to allow anonymous messages. A rare glimpse of this is provided by Green et al. (2006, p. 391):

> An anonymous postings discussion board was set up at Easter 2002 for those students who wished to ask questions anonymously.

This is a risky tactic for the institution. It could be held liable for publicising offensive or defamatory information (Kelly, 2007). Even if forum moderators remove troublesome messages quickly, participants may have already been angered or distressed. Anonymity may encourage engagement with an online forum but it also opens up a range of 'side effects' associated with the 'disembodied comments' anonymous posters leave. This study explores these 'side effects' and their causes from a student perspective, seeking answers to the question of whether anonymity promotes or stymies connections (Johnson, 2008). In this way it is hoped that the paper will contribute towards the pedagogical 'rules of thumb' to which Jones refers (2004).

Literature review

Anonymity has been studied for over a century (Rains & Scott, 2007) with the online variety making an appearance in literature dating from the 1980's (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Kiesler, 1987).

Gary Marx and Craig Scott have made prominent contributions exploring the subtleties of anonymity online. Marx (1999) describes seven 'identity knowledge' types which anonymous communicants may attempt to control in order to conceal their identity, for example, locatability. Scott, writing under the pseudonym 'Anonymous' (1998), defines anonymity as 'the degree to which a communicator perceives the message source is unknown and unspecified' (p. 387). It is this perceived freedom from social evaluation that leads to

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disinhibited behaviour (Pinsonneault & Heppel, 1998, p. 103), whether desirable, in terms of participants 'feeling less stifled' (Hsi & Hoadley, 1997, p. 23), or undesirable, with raging 'flame wars' reaping untold virtual destruction to online spaces (P. Light, Nesbitt, V. Light, & White, 2000).

John Pearson (1999) studied trainee teachers who could post anonymously to a closed member forum. The students said they felt more able to give critical feedback to their peers. Although anonymity did increase participation, Pearson suggests that anonymity allowed individuals to avoid having to develop communication skills and mutual trust to the point that they felt able to give and receive criticism without fear of retaliation. This 'low cost' communication opens the way for disenchanted individuals to 'cash in', such as *Hashman* in Chester and Gwynne's (1998) study. His reckless posting of offensive messages must be every forum moderator's worst nightmare! Additional concerns are raised by Bertera and Littlefield (2003) who argue that reducing the risks of communication through anonymity interferes with critical learning processes and inhibits classroom discussion with the same students: the anonymous online participants worry that speaking up will 'blow their cover'. Ahern and Durrington's (1995) findings were similarly complex in that, while messages were longer from anonymous authors, the lack of identity information 'breaks down the groups' ability to sequence interaction' (p145).

Method

The site chosen was a United Kingdom university, where the author is based. Although issues of power arise from interviewing 'own institution' students, as Moule (2003) explains, 'insider's are favoured with a closer understanding of context.

The study used online focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Online focus groups are not without precedent, although their pedigree, credibility and methodologies are still being established. Using the Internet in this way can be considered ' "the only authentic and congruent" (Smith-Stoner and Webber, 2000) method of investigating different forms of Internet usage'(Mann & Stewart, 2000). This is especially important in the study of a phenomena as context-sensitive as anonymity in online forums (Pinsonneault & Heppel, 1998).

Online focus groups offer several advantages over traditional focus groups. The main ones of relevance to this study, identified by Mann and Steward (2000), include accuracy of transcript, asynchonicity and 'cyber-location'. For Mann and Stewart, the main drawbacks of online research include the risk that participants will be put off by a reluctance to make their feelings explicit and permanent in text. The subjects of the online focus group in this study are the very people who are able to overcome such feelings in these online forums. The interviews were intended to capture the views of students who have not made much use of the online forums. However, due to the lack of uptake of the online focus groups, the available data is dominated by that collected through the seven interviews. There were two online focus groups. Group 1 had four participants providing six messages and Group 2 drew in two participants who posted one message each.

Semi-structured interviews with 7 students were conducted in January 2009. There were five student nurses and two student midwives who could access the same discussion board. Interview stimulus material included pre-set questions, screen shots of a discussion board and samples of anonymous comments: innocuous comments, such as asking the location of a teaching session, filled one side, while the other side had a number of inappropriate comments.

Interviews were transcribed according to the Jefferson notation system (Romero, O'Connell, & Kowal, 2002). Interview transcripts and contributions to the online discussion list were read by the investigator and coded according to Newell & Burnard's 'Pragmatic approach to qualitative data analysis' (2006). The software Weft QDA was used to assist with categorisation. Emergent themes were verified by two independent reviewers.

Ethical considerations

All invited participants were notified of the nature and purpose of the investigation. Interviewees and respondents to the online forum consented to their contributions being used in the study. Research in an online medium presents a problem with obtaining written informed consent – especially if students post anonymous messages. Ess and AoIR Ethics Working Committee (2002) recommend that the more public the forum, the less researchers need to ensure privacy, confidentiality and the right to informed consent. The online forum was located within a space that essentially private, although access to read and post is possible to those studying or

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teaching the particular cohort being sampled. In order to avoid unintended participation in the research, the online discussion list for the study was clearly distinguished from any other discussion lists already in place within Blackboard, using distinctive layout, fonts and colours. Participants of particular interest are those who had used anonymity in an online forum. In order to help assure their participation, the discussion list was set up to allow anonymous messages, in keeping with the essence of the study. As it happened, no participants chose to hide their identity, although their names, as with the interviewees, have been changed for analysis and reporting.

Anonymity in Discussion Boards

Unless otherwise mentioned, all the data quoted below is from the seven interviews. The data is presented under the nine emergent themes.

Experience of online anonymity outwith the university

Some students, **Cathy** (age 42) and **Ferne** (24) said they had little or no experience of discussion lists. **Belinda** (49) had only met them at University. **Alisha** (22) and **Denise** (25) were Facebook users. **Denise** had some awareness of online anonymity, by proxy:

> **Denise**: I'm not quite sure now, what, what it was, but erm, there's, there's something my boyfriend was involved in, a charity thing, and they got their own own webpage,
> **Interviewer**: yeah
> **Denise**: and it's got an anonymous, um, board on there. But it's not completely anonymous, because your computer leaves some long number or something, so it can be traced, so, you know, that is so, you know, if someone goes on and is very abusive , and the police need to be called or something like that

At interview, **Gemma** (23) referred to a number of experiences of discussion boards prior to and outwith University, amounting to a kind of informal online communication apprenticeship. A regular trickle of unnerving warnings from more experienced online forum members had put her on notice to be careful. But the clinching factor was hearing a student conference presenter describe how the NHS had painstakingly traced them back to their unguarded anonymous blog comments.

Elly (28) had certainly benefited from online anonymity it in the past:

> **Elly**: a certain amount= I'm just thinking of when I, used to use forums originally, and I think I had usernames
> **Interviewer**: mmm (agreeing)
> **Elly**: but that's just, you know, everyone had a username
> **Interviewer**: yeah, yeah, there's a lot of that on the Internet, lots of different varieties of anonymity, [as it were
> **Elly**: [yeah, and er, yes that did help, because I was, I think it was um Greenpeace or something like that, I used to write on. And there was lots of vegetarians on there, and I was vegetarian, but I kind of advocated buying meat properly, and I got in real trouble(h) with everyone else on the [forum
> **Interviewer**: [Right. They couldn't track you down and
> **Elly**: yeah they couldn't come and burn my house or anything(h)

However, she did not translate that experience to the University discussion boards:

> **Elly**: 'I cant imagine at this point what would prompt me to want to be anonymous'.

Awareness of online anonymity

Although students had varying levels of awareness of this option, to hide their identity, a message author needs only to click on a tick-box before submitting their message. If students missed it, or had forgotten since their induction sessions, their peer-group could alert them to the potential, if not the technique:

> **Belinda**: because one of, one of my colleagues does one, I know he goes on the discussion board because he spoke to me about it and he goes on anon anonymously, and he also goes on with his name

However, for **Denise**, even reading messages signed 'anonymous' had not made her think of concealing her own identity:

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> **Interviewer**: although you had probably read [anonymous messages without realising that
> **Denise**: [I probably had, to be honest, yeah, I probably just skimmed, I just looked at the message [and that was it
> **Interviewer**: [and wondered how they did that
> **Denise**: yeah

Anonymity made no difference to **Cathy's** engagement online. The discussion board did not appeal to her in any case, preferring other communication methods:

> **Cathy**: so, if I said something and it was totally wrong, or got something wrong, I would feel quite embarrassed by it, so personally, I would have a one-to-one with someone else
> **Interviewer**: yeah yeah
> **Cathy**: or ring somebody... that I knew, and said, hang on, I've just read something, or, is that right, or, you know, I wouldn't erm
> **Interviewer**: yeah so it's not a medium you would choose anyway
> **Cathy**: [no, not at all

Alisha's attention was drawn back to the forum by her peers after a controversial thread had begun:

> I had... I just completely forgot about the discussion board was part of it until one of my friends or someone mentioned about there being a bit funny on it, so I checked it then to see what everyone had been saying.

The matter of interest was an attempt to silence chatting in lectures. It had become something of a *flame war*, with one anonymous comment calling the talkative ones 'a bunch of hairdressers', according to **Elly**.

Approving online anonymity

In spite of clear participation guidelines and the subsequent online disgorgement of views generated by the 'hairdressers' comment, **Belinda** felt the anonymous complaint was justified:

> and I know that online you've said you've got to say, you've got to, adhere to a certain... you know, not be offensive, and things like that, well, sometimes... you want to be offensive ((laughs))...

The size of the cohort and a lack of confidence made her feel unable to voice that kind of topic in the lecture theatre. She was glad that someone had done so online:

> **Belinda**: but but it's once you know what it's done in the lectures... the fact that somebody's put that on the discussion board and said, "look, I'm here to learn and you, you're stopping me from learning", and then more or less said if you want to go talk go out... the lecturers actually do say things like, " well if you want to leave the lecture theatre...", and people are actually now, deliberately saying, "shhh!", you know, using the, where at beginning, nobody said shush to anybody
> **Interviewer**: [you don't think, right, but do you think that that would have happened erm, just by somebody, you know, saying something in a lecture theatre, saying something [face-to-face to somebody?
> **Belinda**: [no because it's too difficult, there's too many people

Anonymous poster identity guessing game

Belinda then described how the identity of anonymous posters was intriguing and a talking point amongst her peers. But this identity 'guessing game' affected a far wider circle than the protagonists and their quarry:

> **Elly**: ... I just, I, even though it had absolutely nothing to do with me I felt quite threatened by it, in a way
> **Interviewer**: uhum (agreeing)
> **Elly**: because that person felt that they could say anything they liked

She went on to say,

> **Elly**: 'Because people were posting anonymously, there was a lot of speculation about who had posted, and who they were talking about specifically, and people took it quite personally, and assumed that they were talking about them, and that the comments were directed at them, when they may not have been.

Disapproving online anonymity

For **Elly**, 'if they did actually had to put their name on something, and they may not have said it, and they might have said it differently'.
But it was not always easy to find the right words:

> **Belinda**: you know, or, you don't know how to put down something that isn't going to sound offensive, even if you're not using offensive language...

Views seemed to harden against allowing anonymous messages when participants considered how the facility had been abused. Interviewees then easily found more and stronger reasons against online anonymity than in support of it – especially in light of the tendency for writing to be disinhibited:

> **Ferne**: I just think, the whole issue of being anonymous leads people to, perhaps express stronger views, or stronger opinions than perhaps they need to under the circumstances

This increased the likelihood for unguarded anonymous comments which could damage staff relations with the whole group: as **Gemma** said, 'you're all under suspicion'.

Imogen, and others, related anonymity to the context and nature of nursing professionalism:

> **Imogen**: personally i would like to see names on here because as we are going to be professionals, i think it is a good way of practising dealing with individual and group issues, conflict etc in a professional way

Ferne, observed that an anonymous message severs normal communication flows, and carries more inherent potential to become heated than identifiable messages:

> **Ferne**: [exactly, you don't give anybody the chance= you can express a feeling or an opinion, but you don't give anybody the chance to sort of talk that through with you, or give the other side of it, it's such a one side= and then someone sees this one sided statement, and then they run with that, and then it just sort of escalates whereas, at least if you've got someone to talk back to you, to sort of say to you, ' well I, I I understand that, but', and sort of give you the other side, to balance it a bit more, and then it sort of calms the situation down

Choosing to use online anonymity or not

Although the 'hairdressers' thread catalysed interest in the discussion board, it did not necessarily generate new messages. Concerns about the degree of protection anonymity afforded her withheld **Alisha** from contributing:

> **Alisha**: but and then I did think, is there a way of getting round that? And for them, someone to find out who actually did it which worried me a little bit and probably why I didn't actually end up... cos if I was going to post something on there, I would have put it as anonymous
> **Interviewer**: right
> **Alisha**: um but I was just worried if there was a way round it - not that I was going to post anything really horrible or anything, it was just that I didn't really want people knowing that it was me that was writing it

Trying to account for why she had not noticed the option for anonymity, **Denise** added,

> yeah, I think, the thing is, you you're more concerned about putting your views on there= I think maybe if you're saying something very controversial, and you're thinking 'oh, I'm not sure if I want this to go on and me put on there', maybe you would look at ways of trying to hide what you are saying

With nothing controversial to say, it did not occur to her to attempt to conceal her identity.

Gemma appeared to be very insightful about online communication. She was acutely aware of her *communication audit trail*:

> **Gemma**: I don't know really, e, um, just in terms of then nobody can, erm, find any information about you, erm. Cuz I think when I first started posting, and things, it was, ah, I wasn't so worried about information being out there
> **Interviewer**: yeah
> **Gemma**: but maybe, maybe now, um, it's just, just seems better to not let any information out there that you don't have to

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Interviewer: yeah

Gemma: so if this information can be given, without giving your name, then, um, then its better to do that [to be careful

When reviewing stimulus material that included some innocuous uses of anonymity, Gemma revealed some dissonance regarding her cautious stance:

Interviewer: so when you [say, earlier

Gemma: [I don't know

Interviewer: that you default to anonymous

Gemma: uhum

Interviewer: but you wouldn't have posted any of those anonymously

Gemma: um

Interviewer: in blackboard now

Gemma: it's hard to know, I think, when I read them like that in black and white, I can't see any reason why you wouldn't [just

Interviewer: [yeah

Gemma: put your name by it, but when it came to me doing it, I'd probably just be very cautious and do it anonymously [anyway

Interviewer: [right

Gemma: um. But for no apparent reason when you actually read those(h) examples, if you see what I mean

Grappling with anonymity

At interview, all the students appeared to find online anonymity a very complex issue. **Ferne** took several minutes before concluding:

I'd, I just, I, well I've already said it, I can see how it would help some people, that would perhaps be too nervous, or to embarrassed, but at the same time I can see the potential of the trouble

Some completely failed to understand the need to post anonymously:

Cathy: so I don't know... you know, I just think, oh, I don't know I just think if they've got something to say, why do they sign it anonymously, why don't they put their name?

Allow or deny

When asked whether staff should allow or deny anonymous messages, participants often found it hard to arrive at a final decision. They did not want to foreclose on the option for students like **Jenny**, from the first online focus group:

I think that being able to post a message as anonymous is essential on a site such as this one. It enables those who may not usually ask for help because they are embarrassed or afraid of looking stupid to get support. I would never abuse the anonymity by using it to cause trouble but I have certainly used it in the past to ask for support on matters that I fear I'd look stupid for not knowing. I may not have sought support if I could not post as anonymous.

Denise was sensitive to **Jenny's** perspective:

So, I think you just have to, just respect people, and just say, ' Right, okay, will give you the option, and if some people want to use it to have a good bitch about people, then they can, but other people can use it, and, I think most people know how to skip things, don't they?

Gemma agreed, for her, being unable to opt for anonymity was severely limiting:

Gemma: I think it, I think it should be allowed. Umm (.1) I'd tend to think that, if it wasn't allowed that the discussion boards would sortof, slowly, die=really. I mean I would think [that

Interviewer: [right

Gemma: people would be very reluctant to sortof get involved and use that as a forum for discussion if there wasn't the option to be anonymous, when they wanted to be.

Contrast that with **Karen**'s one-word response to this question, from the second online focus group: 'DENY!'

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Alternatives or strategies to mitigate threats

A way out for some was to suggest means to mitigate the chances of deviant messages appearing:

> **Denise**: because if it is for tutors to see, I think that, I don't think that it should be anonymous. I think that it should be able for the tutors to find out who that person is, e-mail them, not (on), not publicly, and say, you know,
> **Interviewer**: sure
> **Denise**: ' if you've got a problem with this come and see me'. You know, just e-mail em and say, ' I understand you have a bit of a problem, can I help?'

> **Elly**: yeah, the only other option, I don't know, is, erm, like, erm, like a username rather than it being your name
> **Interviewer**: uhum
> **Elly**: so you'd still track that person, you know, you could bar them if you wanted to
> **Interviewer**: Right
> **Elly**: but they don't have to use their names, so it could be, you know, anything, Fluffy, whatever, you [know

Discussion and Conclusions

None of the participants was a *Hashmann* (Chester & Gwynne, 1998), bent on reeking anonymous virtual havoc 'just for the fun of it'. Indeed, it seems unlikely that such a character would pursue a degree in Nursing or Midwifery. Interviewees, like Imogen, cited their professional standards as reasons for not wishing to use anonymity. Yet, for Belinda, anonymity had empowered someone to post a grievance which was serious enough to justify the violation of established netiquette. While the ensuing hiatus could be said to have '*promoted connections* in the minds and lives of participants' (Johnson, 2008), it was far from a pleasant experience for everyone. Elly spoke of feeling distinctly unsafe, knowing that 'anon' could *fire* inappropriate messages at will. Yet students were often torn when asked whether anonymity should be allowed, not wishing to stifle their peers, even if they were unlikely to use the option themselves. If only there was a way to negate the rogue posts... Up until just after data collection ceased, it was thought to be very difficult to discover the identity of anonymous post authors. Shortly afterwards, it came to light that an anonymous poster's identity could be *very* easily revealed, not just to staff, but to everyone. Moderators can edit an anonymously written message *and* untick the 'post as anonymous' option. In spite of the jeopardy that this incurs, the instructor manual is silent on the matter (Blackboard Inc., 2007, p. 166). As Gemma and Denise knew, total anonymity is not possible online. But knowing how difficult or easy it is for staff to discover anonymous post identities seems likely to affect forum members' sense of disinhibition. Yet Pinsonneault & Heppel (1998) warn that anonymity is extremely complex, context sensitive, multidimensional:

> There is an important subjective dimension to it, and it is the *perception* of whether the offered condition adequately frees individuals from social evaluation that really makes people feel anonymous and behave accordingly. (p. 95)

A participant who failed to read the moderators post about netiquette or the announcement outlining the level of anonymity afforded them could still blithely add inappropriate comments. Moderators who allow anonymity need to be prepared to deal sensitively with these individuals. Students arrive at university with widely varying life experiences, which may or may not include deep learning of 'new' or 'digital' literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Many may be regular users of social networking Websites, although anonymity is incongruent with sites like Facebook and MySpace. Alisha *almost* used anonymity but was too suspicious of being found out to go ahead. Others, like Elly, were committed to keeping identities explicit, while Gemma would use anonymity in almost every message. It was Gemma who gave the fullest account of how she came by 'meta-knowledge relevant to living online' (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 241). To her, an online forum without a significant level of anonymity was seriously flawed and unlikely to sustain online life. How can protagonists of networked learning level the digital epistemological 'playing field', if not by providing students with authentic opportunities of the kind which Brown, Collins and Duguid argue for (1989)? Allowing anonymity brings the discussion forum one step closer to the authentic affordances available outside university, exposing students to a key new literacies learning principle: 'performance before competence.' (Gee, 2007, p. 111)

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