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'Who am I?': Exploring identity in online discussion forums

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ABSTRACT

Identity became apparent as an important theme while investigating the role of interaction in the asynchronous discussion forums of an online post-graduate TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) education subject. Identity emerged through dialogic choices as students projected an impression of themselves, negotiated their positioning within the group, and established what was valued in this context. Without usual face-to-face meaning making cues, what students post to the forums carry the load of what they mean. Discourse analysis of the initial forums using systemic functional linguistics, provided insights into how identity was being constructed concurrently through interpersonal manoeuvring. This reveals a process of multiple identity construction, with the effect of perceived negative identity discussed. The impact of different tasks on identity formation is also considered.

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1. Introduction

The increasing popularity of online learning options in recent years has been punctuated by consistent research findings that distance students experience a sense of isolation compared to their on-campus counterparts (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007; Owens, Hardcastle, & Richardson, 2009; White, 2003). As 'social' beings communication with others is a human necessity (Vygotsky, 1978). However there are issues of communication which may be heightened in an online context, despite the availability of the 'latest and greatest' communications technology (Roberts & Crittenden, 2009). Some of these are uncertainties about interpreting others' attitudes and values, lack of 'real-time' communication, concerns about where an individual perceives they 'fit' in the group, as well as the relatively short duration of the subject intake. These issues may not be unique to the virtual classroom, nor is the asynchronous nature of communication always problematic (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). However it is the lack of access to interactive immediacy and meaning making cues which may be magnified in this 'body-less', 'face-less' context. This can also increase the potential for misunderstanding (Moore, 1993) which can shut down or discourage the interaction necessary to counter feelings of isolation.

In light of these issues, it is suggested that interactional opportunities are crucial for distance learners to be able to project a sense of who they are, in constructing their online identities through the unfolding dialogue (Richards, 2006). From a sociocultural perspective interaction is crucial in communicating a sense of who you are (Vygotsky, 1978) with an emphasis on the inseparability of the individual and the environment in which the social activity occurs (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). In this study, the site for social activity is the asynchronous discussion forums of a post-graduate TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) distance education subject. Any reciprocal opportunities for students to communicate and project an impression of themselves occur here, and provide the primary, if not the only means to do so.

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Recognising when, how and why identity is important (Bucholtz & Hall, 2008) for online learners is integral to understanding the role of discussion in virtual learning contexts. Research into the process of identity formation and identity negotiation as told through the 'voices' of these becoming-TESOL-teachers is essential, particularly in the semiotic domain of asynchronous discussion (Gee, 2003), and in light of the increasing implementation of online education programs. To date, studies of the turn-by-turn construction of identity through dialogic choices during a bounded event such as discussion in a post-graduate online subject, are few.

The purpose of this paper is to present how identity emerges as part of the 'natural' exchange of ideas that occur in online discussion forums. As a result this will contribute to a better understanding of the role of interaction in online learning.

2. Identity formation

> "*. . . we make meaning between us as we talk and listen to the voice of others and of self; as we try to figure out who we are; what we should do or say; what we should have done; and how we should relate with others*" (Cunliffe, 2003, p. 489)

Identities are forged in social activity during the process of making it clear to others (and to oneself) who you are and what you do (Gee, 1999). It follows then that identity formation can be seen as a process that largely constructs, and is constructed by, language (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). This occurs within a group of people who, through interactions, share some kind of "distinctive practices" (Gee, 2000, p. 105), such as those occurring in the context of online learning.

2.1. Defining identity

Common features of identity formation across vastly different research contexts were found in the literature. According to Norton (2000), identity negotiation is inextricably linked to language use in social exchanges. In particular Norton's interest lies in what this means for the second language learner (SLL) as identity negotiation can be impacted when opportunities to use the target language are controlled by others in unequal power relationships. The result can be twofold – SLLs are denied access to vital social networks necessary for negotiating a sense of self, and language development necessary for engaging in these social networks is thwarted. This highlights the constraints that inequity in interpersonal power relations can have on an individual's prerogative to negotiate their identity. The theoretical and practical applications of identity are also considered by Norton (1997) in a critical review of five papers, themed under 'Language and Identity'. Although each of the five authors approach identity differently due to vastly different research contexts (such as, a Vietnamese woman in Canadian ESL night school, Japanese and American EFL teachers in Japan, Mexican families in the US), Norton notes that their conceptions of identity are consistent. These are the impact of social processes and power relations on identity, the central role of language in identity construction, the transitional nature and dynamic formation of identity, and a rejection of any simplistic notions of identity (Norton, 1997). Similarly, Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson (2005) juxtapose three popular theories used to examine teacher identity and the application of theory to understand certain aspects of identity. Despite the differences in theories and research contexts, Varghese et al. (2005) also note the common notions of identity similar to the above conceptions (Norton, 1997, 2000). In synthesising these identity formation can be seen to embody three broad characteristics: as socially formed and driven, including the influence of interpersonal power relations; as constructed through language; and as multi-faceted, complex and dynamic.

Of particular interest in this study of teachers-in-preparation is the notion of teacher professional identity, a concept that Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) set out to define in their systematic study of 22 papers. Perhaps reflective of the complexity of identity, Beijaard et al. (2004) note that many of these studies did not provide explicit definitions of professional identity. The authors subsequently provided their own interpretations which can also be synthesised under the three abovementioned characteristics, with the additions of identity as shaped by self-perception of their role, and as related to aspects of the profession such as standards, knowledge, skills, and social perceptions of the 'ideal' teacher.

2.2. Issues for defining identity formation in online contexts

The online context lacks the physical contextual factors that contributed to understanding identity formation in the above studies. This raises the question of what happens when the 'social space' is not physical and where identity is constructed solely through written texts posted to forums, chatrooms or blogs.

The notion of 'discoursal identity' provides an understanding pertinent to the online context (Ivanic, 1998). Ivanic insists that the written text will contain something of the writer's identity, which in turn is interpreted by the reader. In the construction of their autobiographical self, writers come to the activity with "discoursal repertoires" (Ivanic, 1998, p. 181) resulting from an accumulation of life experiences. One's identity or who we are, Ivanic argues, "affects how we write, whatever we are writing" (1998, p. 181). This approach to understanding identity is also supported by Burgess and Ivanic (2010) and Cunliffe (2003), who are convinced that identity will emerge through discoursal construction in all social practices. When viewed as social practice the written language of the forums becomes the hub around which the social life of the online group is organised (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pennycook, 2010) and from which identity can be constructed.

3. Identity formation in an online context: towards a definition

In the online context the concept of 'discoursal identity' recognises the power of meaning conveyed in the authorial voice and all the sociocultural and historical factors that contribute to this. Therefore evidence of identity formation will emerge from the 'voices' in the discussion forum posts. This understanding, together with other consistent themes drawn from the literature enable a definition of identity formation in asynchronous discussions. Although listed under three broad headings, it is acknowledged that these concepts overlap and intercept with few clear-cut boundaries.

3.1. Identity is complex

Identity is a complex notion due to its dynamic state of formation and redefinition over time and space, its multi-faceted nature, and the complexities associated with what is occurring interpersonally and perceptually between others and self (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). The sociocultural context of an online post-graduate TESOL education subject provides a social space in which students will be constructing multiple identities through their writing. These may be connected to their occupation and education, their status as becoming-TESOL-teachers, as well as related identities as traveller, as adventurous etc. It can also be expected that these identities will be in state of flux over the duration of their study.

3.2. Identity is socially formed and driven

Identity is socially constructed in dialogue and is shaped by self-perception, the perceptions of others, and the interpersonal power relations at play. Inherent in what students post on the discussion forums come assumptions, values, beliefs and expectations associated with post-graduate university study and their positioning in this. This, together with personal values and experiences, will contribute to what is valued (or not) as negotiated in the shared space of the forums (such as education or work background and aspirations and motives for teaching overseas). What students write provides valuable insight into the multi-dimensional and dynamic nature of identity due to the impact of self-perceptions of legitimacy coupled with their perceptions of others towards them. This may then impact the extent that trust and rapport can be established, in turn influencing the openness in discussion and willingness to contribute.

3.3. Identity is constructed through language

Language plays an integral role in the construction of identity. In other words, identity is constructed, maintained, understood, negotiated and interpreted through language. The discussion forums are the vehicle through which insights into feelings of belonging or isolation, legitimacy of self, or lack thereof, will become apparent. In the absence of physical presence and other meaning making cues readily available in face-to-face contexts, what students mean when they post to forum discussions becomes crucial in understanding how they construct their identity and to what extent this is made transparent to others.

4. The study

This study took a qualitative approach to understanding the role of interaction in online learning. As a case study close examination of the online subject[1] within the clearly defined boundary of a 15 week intake allows for an in-depth description and interpretation of the subject as it exists (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995).

The objectives of this research are:

- to focus on identity formation as part of a larger study investigating the role of interaction in online learning;
- to contribute to the literature on identity formation as an important consideration for asynchronous discussion forums;
- to consider when identity matters, how it matters and why it matters in an online education context.

While the qualitative data gathered (detailed in Section 4.2) enables a depth of understanding the online subject not achievable in a quantitative design, caution needs to be taken in drawing conclusions from such a small data set and the limitations that can arise from this. Hence it needs to be acknowledged that data from a small number of participants is not necessarily representative of online learners generally. As such the findings must be viewed as a 'snapshot' of this particular online subject at a particular point in time, with a group membership unique to this.

4.1. Participants and research site

The site of the study was an online post-graduate TESOL distance education subject, at an Australian regional university. The subject focused on researching an international teaching context as well as engagement in debate around teaching English internationally. Participants were the subject tutor, the subject designer and 5 of the 6 post-graduate students

[1] Note: reference to 'subject' throughout this paper refers to the educational subject within a program of study, and *not* to participants.

enrolled in the 15-week subject intake. The students were undertaking Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma or Masters awards in TESOL. They were at various stages of completion ranging from mid-way to near completion. Three of the students were practicing secondary or primary school teachers, with two of these indicating they had previously taught overseas. The other two students were not teacher trained, but had plans for a career move into TESOL teaching, one from an accounting background and the other a recent Arts graduate. It should be noted that prior teaching experience is not a requirement in TESOL postgraduate programs and that diversity in student backgrounds is not unusual. Only one of these students had completed distance studies prior to this subject. All participants indicated that English was their first language and were residing in Australia for the duration of the intake.

4.2. Data collection

Data collection used multiple sources to ensure triangulation of findings (Creswell, 2007). These included the posts from the asynchronous discussion forums, semi-structured interviews, and an online survey (students only). All participants in this study agreed to one 45 minute interview and were residing in Australia at the time of the study. Interviews were conducted by Skype or telephone and were transcribed and checked by each participant. All data was collected after students had completed the subject and final marks had been received, to minimise the impact of research participation on their study program. Pseudonyms were given to all participants.

4.3. Procedure

Students engaged in weekly discussion tasks on 11 topics over 15 weeks. The requirement was to complete all tasks as well as respond to others in the group. These contributed to 40% of the final mark. Perhaps due to the value placed on the discussion forums in this subject, a corpus of more than 75,000 words was produced.

4.4. Data analysis and analytical tools

The posts from the forums underwent a process of multiple readings to identify predominant themes. In preparation for this a system of numbering was devised to retain the order of posting and to ensure that the author and their posts remained intact (Appendix E). After repeated reading and annotation, units of text (no smaller than a clause) making up the emergent themes were removed from the data for further review to enable refining of the theme categories and combining like units so that only the units of text relevant to the themes of identity remained. These thematic units became the focal points for detailed discourse analysis.

The tools used for discourse analysis were from the resources of systemic functional linguistics (SFL). SFL allows moments of language in use to be captured for meaning in the unfolding and development of the forum dialogue over the duration of the subject intake. Identity formation will be evident in the language used by students on the forums as they make sense of the subject content and of themselves, in the process of becoming TESOL teachers.

Firstly, the SFL model provides extensive functional and descriptive categories for fine-grained analysis which will allow insights into how students are construing the world as this unfolds in the content of their discussion, as well as any attitudinal stances being taken. Secondly, as a multifunctional model, SFL recognises the simultaneous meaning making options available in the language choices made whenever we speak or write. This provides insight into the multiple levels of identity, also simultaneously operating in the interaction, as well as to the social meaning gained from the interaction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Two systems in the SFL model will be drawn upon to achieve such a multi-level analysis. The first is Transitivity – what is being talked about by the students – people, things, places, qualities and the processes that are involved (Martin & Rose, 2007; Eggins, 2004). In other words how their construal of what is happening is represented through their language choices (Martin, Matthiessen, & Painter, 2010). The second is Appraisal, which allows access to specific aspects of interpersonal meaning, such as how students adopt stances, construct their textual personas and manage interpersonal positionings and relationships. It is in the interpersonal meaning where moves to include or exclude, align with or disalign will become evident (Martin & White, 2005)[2] and are important issues in the process of constructing identity.

4.5. Clarification of 'interaction' in the online context

Before moving onto findings, clarification of how 'interaction' will be interpreted in the discussion forums is necessary. Identity requires the recognition of others to exist according to Gee (2000). In the online forums this 'recognition' is most obvious when someone connects their comments to another as a direct response or when a separate thread contains specific reference to another. However, what these public forums will not capture are the reader's private interactions as they make sense of what they are reading to build their own knowledge, often without deeming it necessary to post this publically to the forum. It needs to be acknowledged then that students may respond in ways not always captureable on the shared space

[2] For a more detailed explanation of SFL theory see Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), Martin and Rose (2007), Eggins (2004).

of the forums, and that this may be picked up in other data, such as interviews or questionnaires. Additionally, even if there is no immediately related answer, or 'interaction', posting to the forum (making your ideas public) can still have a powerful effect on self-identity (for example, see Chandler, 1998). Regardless, from a sociocultural perspective, some kind of shared learning or self-knowledge results from engaging with the same topics in the common space of the forums, whether this be conversation, writing or reading (Bakhtin, 1981; Cunliffe, 2003). It cannot be denied that this contributes to the process of constructing social realities and identities as learners and as becoming-TESOL-teachers. As such the forums will be viewed as a shared space where socially real identities are formed through discourse (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), with varying degrees of captureable interaction. Each contributing post will thus provide insight into how construal of knowledge and of self is socially and cumulatively constructed over time.

5. Findings

5.1. The pedagogic significance of the introductory forums

The introductory forums are important pedagogically for establishing rapport and trust, setting the 'tone' for the group, and an opportunity for students to talk about themselves while establishing a social presence (Xie & Ke, 2011). Consequently this paper will focus on the data from the first three forums, with interview data used to cross-check discourse analyses, where appropriate. As is the nature of qualitative research, even though identity was not an explicit focus of the forum topics nor of the interview questioning, it became apparent even so (Burgess & Ivanic, 2010; Ivanic, 1998). It could thus be argued that it emerged 'naturally' from the social context.

It became apparent in these initial forums that students' identities were being forged through a process of establishing and building up multiple identities. These emergent identities were as teachers (or not), as travellers, and as becoming-TESOL-teachers. This process was instigated by the tutor, inviting students onto the forum:

> *This is where you can introduce yourself to the group, and tell us a little about your teaching background, what teaching context(s) you're working in and interested in in the future, and anything else you'd like to share.*

Having clear direction for discussion may help with the uncertainties of what to say, an issue found by Gilbert, Morton, and Rowley (2007) in their study of student perceptions of e-learning. As such an introductory task such as this seems to provide students with a safe opening into the group through eliciting a personal response, and begins the process of shaping their identity and their perceived positioning in the group.

5.2. What my credentials say about me

Talking about credentials provides the first indications of which identity is valued, and of the initial positioning manoeuvres within the group. The teacher identity in this context is a highly positioned one, which was unintentionally 'set up' by default. This occurred through the specificity of the instruction "tell us a little about your teaching background" which is then coupled with the tutor's response, whose credentials are listed in terms of what the tutor has done. This provides a 'model' text, but even though the tutor has done much more than teach, the specificity of the instructions may account for the early entry onto the forum of those students with teaching credentials. Finding common ground provides an opportunity to align with the tutor as fellow teachers. These credentials tend to be expressed in terms of 'doing' as modelled in the tutor's introduction, with some examples given below (the processes of 'doing' shown in *italics*):

> Tutor:
> I *completed* my doctoral thesis ...
> and just *finished up doing* lecturing at ...
> I *taught* academic literacy at ...
> I'm now *working* at ...
> and *managing* the business English programs there
>
> Students who are teachers:
> I have been *working* at xx college
> I have been *teaching* ... secondary school students
> Last year I *taught* PDHPE at a local primary school
> I'm *doing* casual teaching
> I've been *teaching* both in Australia and Canada ... for quite a while now
> I'm *working* part-time as a high school teacher
> I've been *teaching* in ...

It is hardly surprising that being able to share in common ground creates an alignment together as 'teachers'. However, what if there are students who do not have a repertoire of teaching experiences to draw on? There are two students in this group who do not, and therefore cannot align with the others in the same way. By contrast these students choose to express

this as a lack – as possessing no teaching credentials, rather than something they have not yet done, therefore cannot yet have:

> I *don't have* an Education or Teaching background . . . (Alice)
> Unfortunately I *have no* teaching background . . . (Vicky)
> (see Appendices A and B for Transitivity analysis of teacher/non-teacher credentials)

This demonstrates firstly the low value Vicky and Alice placed on not being a teacher, and consequently the negative identity assigned to it. This is a perception which is taken on by Alice and Vicky and revealed in negative self-portrayal focused on this lack. At the same time the language choices they have made convey a (perhaps unwarranted) perception that this lack is a fault of their own, rather than simply credentials they cannot possibly yet possess, and in fact were not required by the TESOL program to possess. The self-deprecation can be picked up in their evaluative language choices as the high value of being a teacher by default is reflected in a deficit attitude towards 'not being a teacher'. Language choices which give insight into these attitudes are shown below.

(*Note*: from this point examples of student text will display evaluative language in **bold**, and language choices which raise/lower the force, or sharpen/blur the focus of the attitude or opinion will be **underlined**)

> I **don't have** an Education or Teaching background . . . **My lack** of teaching knowledge and experience **certainly** adds to the **challenge** of the course (Alice)
> **Unfortunately**, I have **no teaching background** (am I **the only one???!**) (Vicky)
> (see Appendix C for Appraisal analysis)

It can be seen that Alice makes a negative judgment of her own capacity in attempting this subject ("my lack . . . certainly adds to the challenge") while Vicky's emotional insecurity is emphasised by "(am I the only one???!)" and was posted a day before Alice came onto the forum. For Vicky "(am I the only one???!)" indicates a heightened consciousness of her own perceived inadequacies in light of the teacher group so far. The use of "???!" in raising the force of the possibility of being the only non-teacher gives insight into the anxiety felt about her positioning in the group, but also the risk she has taken at this early stage in exposing this.

So far the analysis has been able to draw out the value placed on having some kind of teaching experience. This is manifested through the alignment of teachers together as 'do-ers', as well as the disalignment felt by the non-teachers as 'have-nots'. This lack is expressed using overt negative emotion and negative evaluations of themselves. These interpretations may be justified by Lave's claim (in Kanno & Stuart, 2011) as,

> "who you are becoming shapes crucially and fundamentally what you 'know'. What you know may be better thought of as *doing* rather than *having* something" (emphasis added) (p. 240)

with the implication then that lacking possession of teaching credentials (not to have) equates to a lack of knowledge (not to know) and could give insight into these self-deprecating attitudes. Despite this, the (unintended) division created by teacher/non-teacher identities is bridged to some degree as students begin to share their experiences of or aspirations for travel, which allows the focus to shift to 'traveller' identities.

5.3. Traveller identity expressed through hopes and desires

Talking about travel creates an opportunity for the students to make visible a shared passion, as well as something of the cultural shaping of identity by sociocultural factors. As a shared passion, traveller identity is expressed through hopes and desires around travel, which is intensified by the anticipation of the travel opportunities that a TESOL qualification could provide. This reveals a romantic notion of the TESOL career combining teaching English with travel, which is possibly influenced by advertising such as "*Travel the World with a TESOL Qualification*" or "*If you have a passion for travel and teaching, why not combine the two and take a TESOL course? You'll earn money while seeing the world!*" (Seek Learning, n.d.). This highlights a strong Australian cultural identity associated with travel, which may not be of significance in another less geographically isolated context. Traveller identity is also perhaps 'encouraged' by the content of the online subject, which requires each student to research an international teaching context in which they would like to teach.

As travellers, Alice and Vicky are able to participate as equally and enthusiastically as the others and this would partly compensate for the negativity associated with not being teachers. Traveller identity is encouraged as the tutor opens up the dialogic space through: "tell us . . . what teaching context/s you're . . . interested in in the future". This topic elicits students' feelings towards travel which are expressed in emotive language indicating satisfaction:

> I **love** to travel
> I **loved** Singapore, as a city . . .
> . . . the **travel bug set in** . . ..
> I **loved** the diversity (in Malaysia)
> I am **constantly** thinking of international contexts . . .
> I think teaching English would be . . . **a great way to cure the travel bug**

In explaining the function of emotive language (called Affect in the Appraisal system), White (2005) states that the writer is seeking to establish some kind of interpersonal bond with the reader who can relate to their emotional reaction. This would suggest then, that identifying a love for travel which is equally shared by others, indicates an alignment of like-minded travellers and signals the embryonic stages of community building in the group.

Other students are even more explicit in identifying themselves as travellers, showing a high level of self-assurance as they leave the reader in no doubt as to who they say they are:

> I *am* a traveller ...
> I *am* a traveller at heart

As travellers, sharing in a spirit of adventure contributes to their identities, as they work towards their future overseas teaching career and towards unknown, but anticipated destinations:

> I would **love** to teach in China at some point ...
> I **just like** the idea of experiencing cultures outside of my own ...
> The **best** way to experience a community and culture is to **become totally involved**, working and living in the community
> I am **looking forward to** a challenge[3] and learning new things... **what life's all about, right?**
> ... that's why I'm here**!**

As has been consistent so far with discussion about travel, emotions are positive and highly visible as students cumulatively contribute to shared feelings about travel and the 'journey' towards a TESOL teaching career. This alignment as travellers is an important stage in the process of identity formation as a positively received and culturally accepted identity, which should result in other benefits. One would be boosting confidence and motivation to contribute to a more lively or intellectually satisfying discussion (Gillen, 2003) which would also increase their perceived value of discussion (Xie & Ke, 2011).

This type of discussion occurs on the forum when students are directed towards exploring moral and ethical issues around stereotyping. This requires them to make value judgements that positions them as active forum participants as well as aligns them together as 'those who don't stereotype'.

5.4. Becoming a TESOL teacher: TESOL teachers don't stereotype

The discussion on stereotyping highlights the strongest united attitudinal stance made by the students so far. In this, the students make it clear that stereotyping is something that TESOL teachers should not do. Having to make value judgments such as this creates a kind of shared regulative behaviour, and thus contributes to their becoming-TESOL-teacher identities, by highlighting in this case, a non-desirable attribute.

The trigger for these responses is a reading by Kumaravadivelu on Problematizing Cultural Stereotypes in TESOL (2003). The author discusses (and rejects) three characteristics typically assigned to Asian students by, he claims, many in the TESOL profession. Without exception, students responded to the notion of stereotyping and its widespread practice by TESOL teachers with overt negative emotion which could also indicate a certain naivety stemming from idyllic notions of teaching in an international context (and are later challenged through critical engagement with readings such as Pennycook's (2004) and Widdowson's (1994)). The word 'stereotype' itself is negatively loaded. When analysed for attitude 'stereotype' as a thing indicates social harm, and 'to stereotype' as an action is to do with ethics and social norms. Some of the responses illustrating this are provided below:

> In **all** these cases, views are **imposed from outside** of the culture being observed and the **nuances and plurality** of cultures are **neglected**
> For example, he comments that the notion of 'Asian students' is an **obvious stereotype** that **fails to acknowledge** the **significant differences** between students across the range of different Asian cultures ... **Certain stereotypes** such as **obedience to authority**, **passivity** and **lack of critical thinking** are **not unique** to students from **particular** cultures **but** exist across cultures
> To suggest an **entire** 'group' is **obedient to authority** and **passive is ridiculous** ... **Stereotyping does no-one any favours** ... it brings the **entire process down** and is **not effective**
> When 'Asian students' are categorised **in such a way** it **destroys** the **cultural sensitivity** that is **fundamental** to TESOL
> To **stereotype** is to have a **closed mind** that needs to put people into **their own little box** so they can be understood (see Appendix D for Appraisal analysis)

These instances represent a united stance on stereotyping, indicating shared values on those attributes and practices deemed appropriate for a TESOL teacher. As value judgements these are closely connected to personally held values and ethics, indicating an aspect of their becoming-TESOL-teacher identity, as 'those who don't stereotype'.

[3] note here that 'challenge' is viewed as positive.

As the discussion unfolds, the students' evolving professional identities as 'those who don't stereotype' are linked to their own experience or reality. The input of personal meaning into the discussion has the effect of adding a certain level of authority and authenticity to their voices, which is important when constructing identities (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005):

> (In Singapore) . . . as with **any** society, **such a hierarchy of ethnicity** has resulted in the creation of **social stereotypes** The **three common stereotypes** are **by no means unique** to Asian students. In my experience there are **many 'Western' students** who show **all three** of these characteristics in the language learning classroom . . .
> I **already** know what its like to be **the only blonde surrounded by millions of Chinese locals**. I felt **so out of place simply based** on how I look
> In my **limited experience** in ESL classrooms, I have been **fortunate** to work with **a number of** Asian students . . . The classroom interaction of each of these students **appears much more** related to the student's **L2 ability** and **confidence** as well a their **level of comfort** and **familiarity** with the teacher and other students **rather than any 'culturally' predisposed passivity**

Finally, having to think critically on this topic provides the stimulus for some of the students to interact directly with each other, strengthening their collective identity as 'those who don't stereotype' (Gee, 2003). These are typically less reactive than their first responses to the paper. The interaction itself serves as a regulatory tool as the responses become relationally focused, shown through the use of interpersonal devices indicating agreement, through modality, or by using a more conversational tone. This type of interaction builds understanding through sharing personal meaning (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Some examples of this are given, with interpersonal manoeuvres ***italicised***:

> . . . ***I like how you*** phrased it 'perceivable cultural patterns' and ***I agree*** that they do definitely help ***us as teachers*** to . . . understand ***our*** students . . . (Wendy to NP[4]:SH)
> ***I think also*** that teachers can observe certain characteristics about particular cultures but these observations must be flexible and constantly adapting with every new student met (Wendy to Vicky)
> ***Yes, I wonder how*** TESOL professionals could possibly harbour such stereotypes of their students and this is something ***I also found*** quite shocking in Kumaravadivelu's article. (Vicky to NP:SH)
> ***I also find it hard to believe*** that such stereotyping is so prevalent, particularly in the TESOL profession . . . but for teachers who so frequently deal with international students . . . to have those presumptions is awful (Vicky)
> ***I have similar ideas*** about this paper . . . I really don't think that such strong ideas exist, particularly within this profession. ***Who are these teachers that he's talking about anyway?*** (Wendy to Vicky)
> . . . ***it's hard for me to imagine*** anyone stereotyping to this degree (Vicky to Wendy)

These examples demonstrate a cumulative development of their ideas (Mercer, 2000), which can be seen as they move beyond the extremes reacted to in Kumaravadivelu's paper towards developing knowledge that is becoming their own but also drawn from their own experience or conceptions, making an important contribution to their evolving TESOL teacher identities.

The findings have focused on the 'introduce yourself' task as well as tasks that bring students together through shared interests and values, and the impact these have on establishing 'who they are' in the context of an online class. In this study the seemingly 'safer' task of introducing yourself inadvertently resulted in a disalignment between those who could identify as teachers and those who could not. This seemed to be somewhat rectified when given the opportunity to share a common interest, seen in their alignment as travellers. Interestingly, the 'riskier' task where moral and ethical issues were explored resulted in stronger evidence of alignment and provided a stimulus leading to further interaction, developing their identities as well as interpersonal relationships.

6. Discussion

This study has highlighted that diversity can exist, even amongst small cohorts. This is noted by Hughes (2007) as one of the paradoxes in online learning, namely that the inclusion of one identity can render the exclusion of another. It is fair to surmise that the disalignment may not have been visible if the class had not included teacher and non-teacher groups, nor indeed the alignment if they had not all self-identified as travellers. It is also fair to make an assumption that in any group there will be diversity of some kind. In postgraduate TESOL programs this can occur when teaching qualifications are not a prerequisite for enrolment, and also when a TESOL qualification is undertaken as a career shift, thus attracting a diverse student body. The disalignments/alignments that emerged from this study indicate the attachment of personal meaning to students' evolving professional identities as they position themselves in relation to attributes, habits or events described by others or perceived as socially valued, in this instance possessing prior teaching qualifications, having a desire to travel, and qualities that constitute the 'ideal' TESOL teacher. These are all aspects of the TESOL profession that contribute to their evolving identities (Beijaard et al., 2004). While in other professions personal identity associations will manifest differently, the element of personal meaning attached to professional identity is an interesting one.

The attachment of personal meaning to a developing TESOL teacher identity in fact made some alignments and disalignments more visible. The visibility of negative identity associations, its impact on self-confidence, and the effect of

[4] "NP" = non-participant in this study, therefore these posts cannot be included.

aligned identities on cumulative knowledge construction and interpersonal relations, became apparent after discourse analysis of the discussion forums.

6.1. The impact of negative identity association

Perceptions of association with a negative identity, even fleetingly, can impact on levels of self-assurance and confidence. This concern is pointed out by Varghese et al. (2005) who warn that one's level of self-esteem will be negatively impacted through being assigned to or identifying with a negatively valued group. The non-teacher identity taken on by Vicky and Alice in their very first posts was expressed using emotive and negatively loaded language directed towards themselves. Looking at a later forum similar negative attitudinal patterns were picked up:

> *Considering I do not have any practical teaching experience* . . .
> *Having no experience and no fixed teaching philosophy* . . .
> (Vicky – Forum 5)

> *I have no experience at all as a teacher or language teacher* . . .
> *Because of my inexperience however* . . .
> (Alice – Forum 5)

When cross-checked with interview data, the trajectory of negative identity as non-teachers can be seen to continue even after they had successfully finished the subject. The following are some of Vicky and Alice's reflections when asked how they felt about contributing to the forums:

> . . . *if the subject was about teaching and I don't really have that much experience* . . . *when I have to give my opinion* . . . *on something I'm not too familiar with, I guess I feel a bit reluctant* . . .
> . . . *your posts are public and published for everyone to see* . . . *so you don't want to post something* . . . *well, stupid, to be blunt*!
> (Vicky, 2010, interview)

> *It seemed very teacher based to me and I felt a bit left out of that* . . .
> *I felt* . . . *a little anxious and a little inadequate because I don't have an education background*
> *I was very aware that they were probably all teachers and I wasn't*
> (Alice, 2010, interview)

On the other hand Ben, who identified himself clearly and self-assuredly as a teacher in his introductory post ("I *am* a trained secondary English teacher . . ."), responded to the same interview question quite differently:

> *I didn't mind sort of doing it, because a slight sense that your work's being published, even only temporarily* . . . *It does make you* . . . *well it made me spend more time trying to be very clear about what I was saying. So it was a little bit like writing an essay, at least that's how I was treating it – I was formally responding online rather than just making notes or something like that* . . . (2010)

This problematizes the process of induction of students onto the forums. Pedagogically an introductory task is important in providing opportunities to 'meet', for modelling expectations and etiquette, and to begin the 'talk' around identity, an important aspect of developing professional identity (Varghese et al., 2005). However if student diversity is not obvious, some discussion tasks can be risky and can result in a threat to self-esteem and confidence. In this context the foregrounding of teaching credentials by default highlighted that teacher identity matters and consequently, a non-teacher identity is perceived to have lesser value. This was undoubtedly influenced by those who aligned as teachers posting first onto the forum, and occurred despite the tutor's intention that the forums be a place for fostering collegial relations that encourage a more interpersonal tone, firstly by:

> . . . [*establishing*] *that you're not this dusty old professor* . . . *that you're someone who's doing what they're doing, done what they're doing* . . . (2010, interview),

and secondly, by

> . . . *develop*[*ing*] *some kind of interpersonal rapport*. (2010, interview).

The central role of interactional forum participation in this subject's assessment is reflective of the importance placed on discussion.

It is suggested then that the entry point into establishing identity can be potentially more problematic in the online context than in a face-to-face situation. A number of factors contribute to this, such as:

- reduced opportunities for immediate clarification of something, leading to a higher risk of misinterpretation;
- the time lag between messages may exacerbate uncertainties due to the asynchronous nature of the forums, also allowing time for negative impressions to build up;

- reliance on written language to carry the meaning making load, with little control over how it is interpreted by the receiver;
- the 'permanence' of the discussion texts, as opposed to a spoken instruction or response, in that even a 'casual' comment posted to the forum can become a 'model' text which can be referred back to many times (Gillen, 2003).

6.2. Valued identities in alignment

The contrast between disaligned teacher identities and aligned traveller identities has been clearly outlined in the findings, as indicated in the analysis of different meaning options chosen by the students when writing their posts. Identity as travellers is expressed in emotive, positive, and sometimes unequivocal terms as students share in a love of travel. This is also indicative that identity matters when students form interpersonal bonds which can encourage a greater level of self-disclosure or investment in the discussion (Norton, 1997). This was seen during the discussion of travel experiences and aspirations which built up a common interest and, as the conversation unfolded and developed, traveller identities became "socially real" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 591). Shared experiences, hopes and desires encourage alignment, in this case of like-minded travellers and, in the safety that this brings to the social space, traveller identity becomes collective and mutually acknowledged.

The alignment around travel demonstrates the attachment of overt personal meaning to professional identity. Their visibility as travellers indicates the influence of particular cultural and historical factors on students' developing professional identities. In this case the shared romantic notion of travel indicates a significant Australian cultural characteristic, which may be less so in another cultural context. The attraction to TESOL teaching evoked by combining teaching English with travel, also needs to be understood within the cultural and historical context of Australia, particularly as a largely mono-lingual English speaking nation and the embedded values and practices that come with that (see Pennycook, 1994). The cultural and personal factors alone ensure the dynamic state of forming and redefining identities, and it is without doubt that different identity associations will be illuminated by another group of online learners as they create a distinct social context.

The alignment as travellers perhaps sets the foundation for the next task which requires students to engage in critical discussion on stereotyping in response to one of the assigned readings. This task, which possibly is intended to challenge current 'romantic notions' about the TESOL profession, gives insight into their becoming-TESOL-teacher identities as students reflect critically on the issue of stereotyping. This is precisely the kind of engagement intended by the tutor, who said in the interview,

> *I wanted students to engage with the content but also wanted them engage with each other . . . I wanted them to really engage with the issues, the debates around teaching English internationally* (2010)

As shown in the findings, this seemingly 'riskier' task results in a willingness to self-disclose at a deeper level than discussing experience or aspirations. In order to contribute to deeper or more controversial issues the students are required to make value judgements, which seems to be an effective strategy for drawing out aspects of identity emanating from active, critical learning (Gee, 2003). A side benefit to this was the evidence of manoeuvring as the discussion on stereotyping became more interpersonally focused through direct interactions between some students, indicating some stronger alignments and extended discussion. In this united stance as 'those who don't stereotype', students engaged in the process of constructing their becoming-TESOL-teacher identities, which is an important part of developing a professional identity.

7. Conclusions

In summary, identity as a social construct is reliant on the forum discussions for its social reality in the context of online learning. As the findings have suggested, identity is closely connected to cognitive and socioemotional factors emanating from the discussions and the manoeuvring that occurs as they unfold (Kreijns, 2004). Even though the introductory task resulted in the unintended situation of dividing this group into teacher/non-teacher identities, it is still important pedagogically (Xie & Ke, 2011). As an opportunity for dialogue it begins the talk around identity, important for developing self-knowledge. It is suggested that it sets the foundation here for the later critical discussion on stereotyping. In addition the opportunity for students to talk about a shared interest, in this case travel, resulted in an incremental alignment together in their identities as travellers. As the success of the stereotyping discussion relied on self-disclosure of personally held values, it may not have been as successful without the icebreaker of the 'introduce yourself' task nor the coming together in the travel talk. As the 'riskier' task it required students to have a sense of 'who they are' in the group and some impression of their peers in order to create a social space that would encourage a higher level of self-disclosure.

Another consideration is that, if all of these students had a teaching background, the disalignment between teacher/non-teacher identities would not have occurred. This points to the presence of diversity within any online study group and suggests that assumptions made about our students can impact their identity formation positively or negatively, particularly if one identity seems to be privileged over others. The implication is that, by default, other

identities can be perceived as less valued, and as demonstrated here, can have long term or underlying effects unless strategies are put in place swiftly to minimise any negative impact at the level of the individual as well as the group.

To further consider the impact of negative identity, the question arises about the effect on students like Vicky and Alice if the forums were not part of assessment and if participation was voluntary. Would Vicky and Alice have retreated to becoming "read-only participants" (Mackness, Mak, & Williams, 2010, p. 270) lurking in the background with a higher risk of dropping out (Gillen, 2003)? As Gillen argues, identity evolves from shared endeavours and is at the heart of "all effective educational processes" (p. 876). Even though identity is only one aspect of understanding non-participation and feelings of isolation, it is albeit an important one and worthy of ongoing research.

Of relevance to this paper is that TESOL teacher identity may not always be linked only to professional identity, but will also involve particular cultural and historical factors, such as the romantic notion of travelling, and of a TESOL qualification being one way to fulfill this. As the study by Beijaard et al. (2004) highlighted, the literature lacks an explicit definition of 'professional identity' and this points to the need to look beyond the professional component of self-identity of a TESOL educator. This needs to take into account the cultural and historical connotations to the profession, which might influence the identity of those who undertake a course to obtain a qualification in TESOL. While the findings of the study cannot be generalised to another profession and to different cultural and historical contexts, it can be assumed that any professional identity would include an intricate combination of professional and personal elements influenced by cultural and historical contexts. Awareness of these factors is critical for tertiary educators.

It is hoped that this paper will encourage further research into the role of identity in online contexts, particularly in light of its strong emergence despite not originally being a focus of this larger study. The emergent issues from the detailed discourse analysis, made possible through the extensive functional categories available in the SFL model, are drawn from one subject only. The intention here is not to make generalisations so much as to raise awareness of some of the myriad issues faced by educators and distance students in this relatively recent semiotic domain of education and communication, particularly as implementation of online learning is ever increasing. Finally, this paper has sought to provide some insight into when, how and why identity matters as put forward by Bucholtz and Hall (2008), and aptly pointed out by them as important considerations for expanding the analytic toolkit of research into identity.

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Appendix A. Transitivity analysis: Teacher credentials expressed as action

Actor (the doer)	Material processes (of action)	The Range (R) or Goal (G) of the action	Circumstance(s)	Category
I	(ha)ve completed	the MEd (TESOL) (R)		
(I)	am now undertaking	the Grad Cert (TESOL) (R)		
(I)	completed	my practicum (R)	at the University of HK	Place (institution)
I	(ha)ve been teaching		in both Australia and Canada for quite a while now	Place (geographical) Extent: time
I	(a)m completing	my Masters in Education TESOL (R)		
I	have been working		at xx college	Place (institution)
I	have been teaching	secondary school students (G)		
I	taught	PDHPE (R)	last year at a local primary school for three terms	Location: time Place (institution) Extent: time
I	(a)m doing	casual teaching (R)	this year in between my studies part-time	Time Location: time Manner: degree/Time: frequency
I	(a)m working		as a high school teacher	Role

Appendix B. Transitivity analysis: language choices of non-teachers

	Carrier (of the attribute)	Attributive process: of possession	Attribute
Unfortunately	I	have	no teaching background (negative)
	I	don't have (negative)	an Education or Teaching background

Appendix C. Appraisal analysis: non-teacher negative evaluations of self

What is being evaluated:	The language choices:	+ve/−ve	Appraisal system network choices
Vicky: her teaching credentials	**Unfortunately**	negative	Attitude: Appreciation: social valuation
	I have **no teaching background**	negative	Attitude: Appreciation: social valuation
Vicky: herself	*(am I* **the only one***???!)*	negative	Attitude: Affect: insecurity Graduation: Focus: sharpened (**the only**) Graduation: Force: raised (**???!**)
Alice: her teaching credentials	*I* **don't have** *an Education or Teaching background*	negative	Attitude: Appreciation: social valuation
Alice: herself	*My* **lack** *of teaching knowledge and experience*	negative	Attitude: Judgement: social esteem: capacity
	certainly *adds to the* **challenge** *of the course*	negative	Graduation: Force: raised (**certainly**) Attitude: Appreciation: social valuation

Appendix D. Attitudes towards stereotyping

What/who is being evaluated	By whom?	Text examples (focus of Appraisal analysis shown in **bold**)	+ve/−ve	Appraisal system network choices
Stereotyping as an action; and indirectly those who are guilty of this	Ben	*In all these cases, views are* **imposed** *from* **outside of the culture** *being observed*	neg	Judgement: social sanction: propriety (ethics, social norms)
		and the nuances and plurality of cultures are **neglected** (Text 1)	neg	Judgement: social sanction: propriety
	Sharon	*... to suggest an entire 'group'...* **is ridiculous** (Text 3)	neg	Judgement: social sanction: propriety (social norms)
	Ben	"*certain stereotypes ...* **obedience to authority, passivity and lack of** *critical thinking ...*" (Text 2)	neg	Judgement: social sanction: propriety (ethics, social norms)
	Vicky	*When 'Asian students' are categorised* **in such a way it** *destroys the cultural sensitivity that is fundamental to TESOL* (Text 4)	neg	Judgement: social sanction: propriety (ethics, social norms)
Asian cultures	Ben	*... and the* **nuances and plurality** *of cultures are neglected* (Text 1)	pos	Appreciation: social value
Stereotyping (as a thing)	Sharon	*Stereotyping* **does no-one any favours** ... (Text 3)	neg	Appreciation: social validity (social harm)
		... it **brings the entire process down** ... (Text 3)	neg	Appreciation: social validity (social harm)
		... (stereotyping) *is* **not effective** (Text 3)	neg	Appreciation: social validity (social harm)
	Vicky	*... it* **destroys** *the cultural sensitivity that is fundamental to TESOL* (Text 4)	neg	Appreciation: social validity (social harm)
People who stereotype	Wendy	Wendy makes a negative judgement on the character of people who stereotype in terms of ethics and social norms, in the whole of Text 5	neg	Judgement: social sanction: propriety (ethics, social norms)
		to stereotype is **to have a closed** *mind ...* (Text 5)	neg	Judgment: social esteem: capacity (criticism)
		... a closed mind that **needs to put people into their own little box** ... (Text 5)	neg	Judgement: social sanction: propriety
	Ben	*... the notion of 'Asian students' is an obvious stereotype that* **fails to acknowledge** ... (Text 1)	neg	Judgement: social esteem: capacity (criticism)

Text extracts:

1. In his article ... in all these cases (i.e. Western representation of Orientalism), views are imposed from outside of the culture being observed and the nuances and plurality (+) of cultures are neglected. (Ben)
2. For example, he (Kumaravadivelu) comments that the notion of 'Asian students' is an obvious stereotype that fails to acknowledge the significant differences between students across the range of different Asian cultures ... educational factors are believed to influence student behaviour and attitudes possibly more than any inherent cultural qualities of the students. Certain stereotypes such as obedience to authority, passivity and lack of critical thinking are not unique to students from particular cultures but exist across cultures (Ben)
3. To suggest an entire 'group' is obedient to authority and passive is ridiculous ... Stereotyping does no-one any favours ... it brings the entire process down and is not effective (Sharon)
4. When 'Asian students' are categorised in such a way it destroys the cultural sensitivity that is fundamental to TESOL (Vicky)
5. To stereotype is to have a closed mind that needs to put people into their own little box so they can be understood (Wendy)

Appendix E. Sample of discussion thread organisation

Thread / Interaction Cluster #	Resp Level	Resp. #	Thread Initiator (= Level 0)	Direct Response Level 1	Direct Response Level 2
8	0		Hi from Alice- Alice, 5 Aug, 21:52		
IC 7	0		International Context - China - Vicky - 5 Aug, 09:56		
IC 7	1	1		Re: International Context - China - NP:SH - 9 Aug, 16:23	
IC 7	2	2			Re: International Context - China - Vicky - 10 Aug, 11:29
IC 6	0		Hello! - Vicky - 4 Aug, 09:42		
IC 6	1	2		Re: Hello! - Wendy - 7 Aug, 15:01	
IC 6	1	1		Re: Hello! - NP:RF - 6 Aug, 10:09	
IC 6	2	3			Re: Wendy & RF - Vicky - 10 Aug, 11:50
5	0		Hi All!! - Sharon - 3 Aug, 13:10		
4	0		Hello Everyone - Wendy - 3 Aug, 11:28		
3	0		Hello - NP:RF - 2 Aug, 20:34		
IC 2	0		HI Everyone - NP:SH, 2 Aug, 08:12		
IC 2	1	1		Re: HI Everyone - Wendy - 24 Aug, 12:25	
1	0		Hi and Introduction from your tutor - Tutor A - 1 Aug, 21:53		

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