"ONLY CONNECT!": ENGAGING ONLINE WITH TEXTS AND WITH PEERS

by

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Abstract
This research study of a mixed-mode first year English literature course on argumentative prose essays analyzed learners' social practices and online discourse in order to identify ways in which learners engaged with one another and with texts. Discourse analysis provided a better understanding of the ways in which students negotiated conflicting identities, values, and ways of thinking through the act of composition. Findings identified aspects of the online environment that facilitated students' acquisition of academic discourse and ways in which participation in online discussion enabled students to become full participants in the academic community.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................. ii
Table of contents ...................................................... iii
List of tables ........................................................... vi
List of figures .......................................................... vii
Acknowledgements ..................................................... viii

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the study

1.1. Introduction: Complex connectivity and learning .............................................. 1

1.2 Description of the study

1.2.1 Research site ..................................................... 7
1.2.2 Project description and research questions ............................................... 7
1.2.3 Course description ............................................... 8
1.2.4 Texts .............................................................. 11
1.2.5 Course objectives ................................................. 12

1.3 Review of the literature

1.3.1 e-learning and higher education

1.3.1.1 Changing universities and changing needs ........................................... 13
1.3.1.2 Mixed-mode and hybrid on-line courses ............................................. 15
1.3.2 Knowledge-building and knowledge-building discourse .................................. 15
1.3.3 Advantages of computer-mediated communication (CMC) instruction ............... 16
1.3.4 Theories of learning and computer-mediated communication .......................... 18
1.3.5 Advantages of computer-supported learning

1.3.5.1 Dialogue, scaffolding, and multiple perspectives .................................. 18
1.3.5.2 Articulation ...................................................... 20
1.3.5.3 Critical thinking .................................................. 20
1.3.6 Constructivist perspectives and online learning ......................................... 22
1.3.7 Research studies of learning and interaction

1.3.7.1 Research findings ............................................... 23
1.3.7.2 Teacher's roles ............................................... 28
1.3.8 Academic literacy practices and academic genres

1.3.8.1 Origins of academic genres ........................................... 28
1.3.8.2 Academic literacy and writing in online environments ........................... 32
1.3.9 Bourdieu's notions of "legitimacy," "symbolic capital," and "cultural capital" ........ 34

1.4 Research Design

1.4.1 Rationale .......................................................... 35
1.4.2 Data Collection .................................................... 37
1.4.3 Participants in the study ........................................ 37
1.4.4 Data ............................................................... 38
1.4.5 The Researcher's Role ......................................... 39
1.4.6 Data Collection Procedures .................................. 39
1.4.7 Overview of the following chapters ......................... 39

Chapter 2: Key Issues: Learning, Social Practice, Discourse, Identity, and Argumentation
2.1 Learning, discourse and social practices ....................... 40
2.2 Discourse, texts, and social practices ......................... 44
2.3 Social practices, education, and academic genre ............ 46
2.4 Text types and genres ............................................ 46
2.5 Discourse communities and academia ......................... 49
2.6 Discourse and social practices in the context of this study .. 50
2.7 Learning, participation, and social practices .................. 51
2.8 Analyzing Argument
2.8.1 Toulmin's structure of argument .......................... 56
2.8.2 Argumentation and literary texts .......................... 57
2.8.3 Argumentation and academic literacy practices ........... 61

Chapter 3: Engagement and Interaction: The Case of John Stuart Mill
3.1 Rationale ........................................................... 63
3.2 Social practices: Academic genre and argumentation ........ 64
3.3 Engagement with the Text ....................................... 65
3.4 Features of argumentative writing identified in the on-line posts 66
3.5 Introduction to the Module ....................................... 67
3.6 Online discourse in the debate on Mill ......................... 68
3.7 Instructors' views ............................................... 69
3.8 An online invitation: Why read "On Liberty"? ................. 70
3.9 Speaking up: Speaking as an "I" ............................... 72
3.10 Speaking up: Interpersonal interaction ....................... 76
List of Tables

Table 4.1 Overview of posts ........................................... 99
List of Figures

Figure 2.1 Sample of argumentative strategies ........................................... 9
Figure 2.2. "Passing Notes" hyperlink ......................................................... 10
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"Only Connect": Engaging On-Line with Texts and with Peers

Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon.
Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted,
And human love will be seen at its height.
Live in fragments no longer.
Only connect...

--E.M. Forster, Howards End

Chapter 1
Introduction to the study

1.1 Introduction: Complex connectivity and learning

"Only connect!" E.M. Forster's often-cited refrain conveys an urgent plea for connection made in a time in which technology had already wrought irreversible changes on the British landscape—both physical and social. Repeated references to the trains and motor vehicles, the layers of dust and grime which had begun to infiltrate the air, and the continual clatter and frenetic pace of crowded cities in the novel convey Forster's awareness of the influence of technology on human lives and human interaction.

Forster’s novel is by no means a simple diatribe against technology and progress. Contrasting the peaceful refuge offered by the country estate which gives the novel its title with the busy and often confusing city of London where the main characters live, Forster explores the connections afforded and constrained by social environments and social mores. "The more people one knows the easier it becomes to replace them," Forster's protagonist Margaret observes. "It's one of the curses of London." Margaret has often meditated on the increasing division between the "great outer life," "full of telegrams and anger," which though "obviously horrid," "often seems the real one" and which seems diametrically opposed to the life she and her sister Helen value, a life in which "personal relations" are considered "supreme." In the "great outer" life personal relations have become completely devalued: marriage is equated with marriage settlements and death with death duties (p. 25), and personal connections, although easily established, are all the more easily devalued (Perkowitz, 1996). Although the great outer life carried on in the busy cities, factories, and railway terminuses has its attractions: "...there's grit in it. It does breed character," it is a life in which human attempts to establish and maintain connections are fraught with difficulty, and the repeated misconnections and disconnections in the novel have profound consequences for each of the characters. Despite the confusion and distress that both Margaret and her sister Helen experience in their attempts to connect with others, they affirm that "personal relations are the real life, forever and ever" (p. 25).
Although Forster’s novel was written between 1908 and 1910, a time in which the telephone was new and the computer had not yet been invented, his refrain is often cited in studies of computer-mediated communication as it is the seemingly unlimited connectivity afforded by computer-mediated communication—the unparalleled possibilities it offers to establish and maintain connections between individuals—which appears to be one of its greatest advantages. However, research studies of on-line interactions often reveal the same misconnections and disconnections as those which Forster’s characters experience.

As the use of on-line education, whether through distance education courses, lecture course in which interactive bulletin boards used to post class notes, or mixed-mode classes in which students both meet face-to-face and participate in on-line discussion, has become increasingly widespread in universities and colleges, the "technological tools for learning are becoming increasingly interactive, widely distributed and collaborative" (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998; Bonk and Wisher, 2000). In an overview of future trends in higher education, Nicholas Burbules, (2000) expresses the hope that "the creative use of new technologies" can "increase "student -student and student-faculty interaction," thereby "broadening the opportunities for exploratory and discovery-oriented learning" (para 8). Through online discussion boards and computer conferencing, traditional teacher-student dialogue and class discussion can be extended through what Linda Harasim (1990) terms "many-to-many communication" in which students are able to build upon and amplify each others’ responses.

The unparalleled connectivity afforded through digital technology has multiple facets. In a review of the development of communication technology and its relation to pedagogy, Carmen Luke distinguishes between what she terms "industrial-model schooling based on static print/book culture and competitive individualism" and the "new discourses and practices" which have evolved as educators recognized "collaborative learning possibilities and deterritorialized meaning making and knowledge configurations enabled by new technologies" (2003, p. 398). Access to the internet and the wide range of practices which have evolved along with hypertext, on-line gaming, and participation in on-line bulletin boards and discussion groups have transformed everyday literacy practices. According to Luke, "digital technologies have remediated traditional text genres and forms and have generated new modes of textual practices and immediacy" (p. 398).

Through hypertext, digital links between texts which have made vast amounts of information accessible in on-line format, digital technology affords a seemingly limitless potential to create new connections and intertextual meanings by electronic links.
Information is structured as a network of hypertext links rather than in a hierarchical, linear manner. The writer of a hypertext document offers a multiple pathways which readers follow depending on which hypertext links they choose rather than structuring the text as a sequenced pathway. Because hypertext allows readers to select the connections they want to make between sections of the text, to incorporate or discard information as they choose and to ultimately “produce their own meanings,” the “boundaries between readers and writers” in digital texts structured this way become blurred (Snyder, 1998, p. 127). Hypertext enables writers to juxtapose diverse texts and generate diverse interpretative choices. As sound, graphics, animation, and video can also be digitized, hypertext links can be used to create multimodal texts which are often termed ‘hypermedia.’

Luke emphasizes the fact that the unprecedented connectivity afforded by digital technology is of particular interest to educators who have adopted a social constructivist view of knowledge and learning in which “knowledge is apprehended and appropriated in and through social interaction, dialogue, negotiation, and contestation,” urging educators to employ the capacity of the internet to “draw on diverse sources of information” it offers, use it as a “means of communication” between learners and a virtual space in which “socially interactive communities of learners” are able to engage in “learning and information exchange and production” (p. 398). According to Luke, the new text genres and textual practices afforded through digital technology, “have made new demands on reading and writing, viewing, social exchange and communication” (p. 401), engendering a “complex connectivity” between digital texts and the social practices of reading and writing that have evolved with the greater accessibility and the use of digital texts in educational institutions. For example, hypertext offers a new way to draw connections between texts and the “web-like pattern of links that readers can pursue or ignore” “demands a particular kind of reading, a cognitive mapping and pathway navigation” (Luke, 400) from readers.

In addition to the meaning-making possibilities afforded by hypertext, digital technology offers unprecedented possibilities for connections between individuals, what Linda Harasim (2000) terms “many-to-many communication, possibilities for enhanced learning through active exchange between individuals, identification of new perspectives, multiplicity of perspectives, and opportunities for conceptual change as individuals compare, discuss, modify, and/or replace concepts through online dialogue (p. 51).

Olga Dysthe’s (2002) study of an asynchronous, web-mediated discussion in a university philosophy class also focuses on the advantages of many-to-many communication, but from a slightly different theoretical vantage point. Dysthe
investigated the kinds of interaction that took place in the online environment in order to identify interactions that facilitated learning. Dysthe used Bakhtin’s view of texts as dialogic and “multi-voiced” and Rommetveit’s theory of intersubjectivity as a framework for her analysis, explaining that the online environment, in which “multiple voices struggle with one another, argue or supplement one another,” is one which creates high learning potential, echoing Bakhtin and Rommetveit’s conception of learning in which “meaning and understanding” are created where there is a ‘reciprocity of differences’” (p. 348). Dysthe’s view of online communication echoes Bakhtin’s notion of appropriation:

An important part of learning is ‘to appropriate the word’, to understand and make the thoughts of others our own. This often takes place through confrontation with others’ interpretations and appropriations. ‘The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic intention’ (Bakhtin 1981, p. 293, cited in Dysthe, 2002, p. 349).

In Dysthe’s view, the texts which others create online function are “thinking devices” in which learners are confronted with “others’ interpretations and appropriations,” and become springboards for new thought. Through the process of using other people’s texts as thinking devices,

new meanings may also be generated. It is the responsibility of both teachers and students to facilitate both the appropriation of the words of others and the creation of new knowledge (p. 351).

Marlene Scardamalia and Carl Bereiter (1996) base their concept of “knowledge building discourse” upon Karl Popper’s (1962) assertion that “recognized argument and criticism as the driving forces in the advancement of scientific knowledge, with research having its impact through these discourse processes” (p. 257). They argue that theories of learning should be based on the “social processes of research teams and laboratories” (p. 253) and that these should be implemented in classroom practices. Scardamalia and Bereiter are interested in educational research that can “characterize knowledge-building discourse and then recreate classroom activity to support it” (p. 257). In their view, classrooms should function as knowledge-building communities in which knowledge is advanced through argument, criticism, and revision of new discoveries and argue that online interaction can facilitate knowledge building in this manner through student engagement in well structured activities.

All the researchers and theorists mentioned here share a similar focus on learning as a conversation and learning facilitated through dialogue. Online discourse, although it resembles spoken discourse in many ways, is primarily written discourse, and it is
through the process of writing that learners articulate and clarify their ideas before sharing them with others. In his analysis of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and cognition, Charles Crook (1994) proposes that "one way that learners might gain from working closely on a problem with a peer is by being required to make their thinking public and explicit" (p. 134), locating the "strength of peer work in self-reflective processes arising from the responsibility of justifying and declaring your ideas to a collaborator" and that witnessing the process provides added benefits as "an 'expert partner' prompts, elaborates, and scaffolds the process" (p. 134).

Gordon Wells (1990) is also concerned with cognition, but frames it in relation to literacy and literacy practices: "To be literate... is to have the disposition, as composer or interpreter, to engage with a text" (p. 269), insisting that "written language—as a medium through which individuals, through the interrogation of their own or others' texts, can extend their own thinking and understanding" empowers the mind (p. 361). Wells distinguishes five types of literacy, but values what he terms "epistemic literacy" above all others:

When one reads .. when one considers alternative interpretations and looks for internal evidence to choose between them ... one is engaging with the text epistemically . . . one may see connections between things one already knows or achieve insights of feeling and understanding (p. 374).

While epistemic, or knowledge-making literacy is concerned with both reading and writing, through writing, "the text can be "returned to, critically examined, reconsidered, and perhaps made the basis for the construction of a further, sustained text of one's own," a process in which "one is forced to go even further in the development of one's understanding" (p. 374). Through the creation of texts, therefore, we construct and interrogate knowledge, articulating emerging concepts and reformulating them by reading them and sharing them with others. The online environment, one in which written texts can be shared and interrogated through "knowledge-building discourse," is therefore one in which learners engage with others and with texts, constructing new meanings and encountering diverse and conflicting views. The "complex connectivity" it offers includes connections between learners and the texts they create, connections between different learners and diverse conceptions of knowledge, and the ways in which these contribute to "broadening the opportunities for exploratory and discovery-oriented learning" through digital media.

The theorists cited here are interested in global issues rather than specific ones. While they use phrases like "epistemic literacy," "knowledge-building discourse," "collaborative learning possibilities," and "knowledge configurations enabled by new
technologies,” they do not address the specific issues as to how such objectives can be realized in classroom teaching and learning practices or in website design. Our purpose in this study is to bridge the divide between theory and practice (albeit to a limited extent) by analyzing the knowledge-building discourse and literacy practices in a specific group of learners in order to understand how these are manifested in actual online interactions, and how they can be facilitated in the creation and teaching of web-based courses.

1.2 Description of the Study
This study focuses on the “complex connectivity” afforded by digital technology in a mixed-mode first year university English course (Studies in English Prose) offered at a large university in Western Canada. It analyzes on-line interaction between students to better understand the ways in which students connect with one another in the on-line environment, the textual practices that evolve in this particular context, the connections that students begin make between the texts and their own lives, and the ways in which students begin to connect the texts they read with their own textual practices through writing and responding to online postings. The term “engagement” conveys the way in which the instructors in this particular course framed the notion of connectivity in relation to their objectives for the course. The term recurred in interviews and was used both as a verb (to engage with something) and as a noun (the students’ engagement in something). Examples include: “engage with the text;” “engage with the readings;” “engage with the postings;” “engage in an interaction;” “engage with the argument;” and “engage with a topic.” The notion of “engagement” was framed in a variety of ways by the instructors involved in the course. The term was equated, often by the same person, with active participation or involvement as evidenced by posting reflections or responding to others, with the degree to which a student had connected the issues in a particular text to his or her own experience, with a student’s ability to analyze the connection between the rhetorical strategies in a particular text and its content, and with the ability to make connections between one text and texts previously studied. The didactic materials focused on persuasive strategies used in argumentative prose in the hope that the students would be able to connect their deepening understanding of persuasive writing to their own writing and to the texts they encountered in other parts of their lives:

it's not just to read it at face value. . . but to really think about what's being said and how it's being said . . . and hopefully to start to apply some of that to their own writing. . . if we think more about how we persuade others, we'll have a better understanding of how it's happening to us
1.2.1 Research Site
The study was conducted on a first year English prose course provided in a mixed-mode format offered in a large university located in Western Canada. The students were required to make at least one on-line posting per week and met once a week in small (20 student) discussion sections for face-to-face discussion. Requirements and format of the on-line posts changed weekly, reflecting the assigned readings for that week and the instructors’ objectives.

1.2.2 Project Description and Research Questions
The research project focuses on on-line data collected a first year English non-fictional prose course. The focus of the course was on argumentative prose essays, with a specific emphasis on analysis of argumentative strategies for specific purposes. The data was collected from January to April, 2005, the third time that the course had been offered in a mixed-mode format (on-line interaction in conjunction with weekly face-to-face discussion sections). Student and instructor feedback from the two previous on-line courses was very positive, and the instructors involved in course design and development who had taught the course in both on-line course and mixed-mode formats commented that the quality of argumentation in on-line discussion was often superior to that of formal written assignments. The course was offered (and continues to be offered) both in lecture format and in the mixed-mode format, and an in-depth evaluation of the course (Wells, 2002) was undertaken after the course was offered in mixed-mode format for the first time, primarily to obtain information on student satisfaction and to compare student outcomes in the both formats (mixed-mode and lecture-based).

Before drafting a research proposal, the researcher met with the course consultant, who had been involved in development of the course and had taught it twice in mixed-mode format, to learn more about the course objectives, the texts, the website setup and design, and to get an overview of mixed-mode teaching and learning in this particular course. During the meeting, the researcher was provided with a copy of the report prepared after the preliminary evaluation of the course. The course consultant commented that one of the major advantages of the mixed-mode format was the marked improvement in the students’ writing over the term. Both he and the course coordinator felt that the online environment facilitated a kind of writing that eventually transferred into more formal writing assignments.

As a teacher of academic writing to ESL students, the researcher was particularly intrigued by this comment and wondered whether further research could identify specific features of online discourse which might contribute to the improvement in the students’
writing. The issue surfaced again in interviews with the instructors during the data collection process:

from the beginning of the course I was... quite struck by the... the high quality of the postings... they do get better as the term goes on... and then... something else that we're very interested in is... a transference from the posting experience to... essay writing and examination writing experience... that's where we see... the more striking improvement, I think.

... we found that the students... generally wrote... better... their ideas were crisper... clearer when they... were not writing formal papers... when they could... when they didn't take on the student persona they could... speak as... themselves in an... environment that they were familiar with...

The course coordinator and consultant, who were both involved in creating the website structure and materials, agreed that the website was deliberately structured to give students as many opportunities as possible to "say something they actually want to communicate to others," which, as the course coordinator observed, "is the key to good writing." He felt that it was important to "encourage students to express themselves in essay writing and exams "in the way that they do... in postings" and that over the term, the instructors observed "a transference from the posting experience to... essay writing and examination writing experience" which represented a "striking improvement" in the students' writing ability. The focus of the research study therefore became to explore two questions: 1) to understand the literacy practices of a particular group of learners and ways in which they facilitated knowledge-building discourse; and 2) to identify ways in which participation in online discussion facilitated learners' understanding and use of academic discourse. During the data analysis process, a third question emerged: 3) how does this particular group of learners engage with peers and with texts through participation in online discussion?

1.2.3 Course description

Course materials included a wide variety of prose essays in English, some of which were translated from the original languages in which they had been written. The course was divided into modules, each of which focused on one essay or two essays on a similar topic. The essays ranged from the Italian Renaissance (an excerpt from Macchiavelli's "The Prince") to contemporary digital culture (Neil Postman's "Virtual Reality, Digital Students"), and included wide range of topics and issues. The modules were set up as a clock face, with a pointer which could be clicked onto each section.
Each module included an introductory video, often with excerpts of the text read by the author or by members of the English Department so that students were able to hear the rhetorical effects of the text as well as see them on the page. The website included time-line learning object in which all the texts were situated relative to one another as well as within the particular historical events taking place at the time when they were written, and the timeline could be accessed on every module homepage. By clicking on the clock face in the introductory homepage for each module, the students could easily move back and forth between the different sections. Each module included eleven sections:

**Background**: a brief biography and introduction to the historical, social, and political context in which that module’s particular essay or essays were written

**Key Terms**: a brief glossary with key terms used in the essay, as well as literary terms which might be of interest for analysis or relevant terms from the particular historical context in which the essay was written

**Pointers for Reading**: a guide to focus the student’s initial reading and analysis of the essay in that module

**Go Read the Essay**: further questions to consider while re-reading and to think about in relation to the posting assignment for the week

**Commentary**: A model analysis and commentary on sections of the text read during the week. The focus was generally an analysis of the relationship between form and content as manifested in this particular text.

**Argumentative Strategies**: an in-depth analysis of the specific rhetorical strategies and persuasive techniques used to address a particular audience. This section also contained questions with links to a discussion thread so that students could respond easily and quickly to the questions. These questions often asked students to discuss the effectiveness of the writer’s use of language or rhetorical strategies. An example is shown in Fig 2.1.

> Note the effectiveness of Machiavelli’s language as an argumentative strategy. Machiavelli’s advice is bluntly and assertively stated. What effect does this have on his readers? Does the tone of his language work to persuade you of his theories of power, and, if so, could the same effect be achieved with a gentler tone of argument? (post your answer in the “M8.AS2: Tone” thread)

**Fig 2.1 Sample of argumentative strategies**

**Go Reread the Essay**: Some further general commentary

**Your Postings**: The students had access to postings made by all students, but posted in their discussion section only.

**Further Exploration**: Often included a comment on the relevance of the essay to current events, other words by the author(s), and references to critical essays which might be of interest, many available through hypertext links.

**Discussion Group**: Instructions for the weekly face-to-face discussions.

**Making Connections**: Pointed out connections between the current essay and the reading for the next module.
Further information: Included other works by the same author, relevant historical documents, and hyperlinks.

Another section, "Passing Notes," (see Fig 2.2) was available through hypertext link on every page of the module. In this section, students were encouraged to ask questions, whether about computer problems, a class assignment, or difficulties with the textbook, and to post anything of interest to them, whether it was a question about a class assignment including random thoughts sparked by their reading or discussion which did not seem to fit into the mandatory weekly discussions.

![Fig 2.2 "Passing Notes" hyperlink](image)

This section of the website was a place for students to post their thoughts and engage in free discussion. The first post in the section was made by the course director and was titled "Your Chance to Say Something":

Passing Notes is our forum for whatever you might want to raise about the course--or about life, for that matter. The last time we gave this course, two years ago, there was a memorable, highly impressive debate about the U.S. invasion of Iraq, for example. So compose a message and join (or start) a conversation.

The students took up the course director's invitation to share their thoughts, and many of the most lively on-line discussions and arguments were made in this section of the website.

In addition to all the course materials, the course website provided detailed guidance and models for all class assignments, in-class essays, take-home essays, and essay examinations in which students were asked to analyze the essays in further depth and to demonstrate their ability to argue a specific thesis in a well thought out essay format.

Invitations to respond to questions could be found in all the sections of the website. Interested students could respond immediately through a small icon which led students to a discussion thread for that question. The website design, therefore, attempted to combine the advantages of offering an on-line "repository" for all the course material which students could access at any time as an equivalent to the lecture notes in a traditional lecture format with the increased interactivity afforded by the on-line environment and as a means of increasing opportunities for discussion sparked by the instructor's questions.
The students were divided into four sections, each of which was led by a graduate student teaching assistant (TA). Students were required to complete weekly readings and to post a response to a specific question on the reading by Monday midnight and to attend a Thursday morning face-to-face discussion section with other members of their group. Students engaged in directed on-line discussion in their section by posting directly to that section; however, all students had access to posts in all sections as well as other parts of the website. Each TA was responsible for creating the weekly questions and/or assignments in his or her discussion section, and each TA monitored and responded to the posts in his or her section. Although the TAs often posted similar questions or gave the students similar weekly assignments, each TA was free to guide the on-line discussion as he or she chose. Each TA led a weekly face-to-face discussion section with his or her group, and the TAs were free to use whatever strategies or activities they thought most appropriate. The course director monitored the posts in all sections, and was primarily responsible for monitoring and responding to posts in the "Argumentative Strategies" and "Passing Notes" sections of the website. He also attended one of the discussion sections every week and participated actively in classroom discussions. He often quoted from and used online posts made in the section that week as a springboard for discussion.

1.2.4 Texts

**Texts:** *(excerpted in The Norton Reader edition)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>George Orwell</td>
<td>Politics and the English Language (Module 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shooting the Elephant (Module 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Luther King</td>
<td>Letters from Birmingham Jail (Module 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia Woolf</td>
<td>In Search of a Room of One’s Own (Module 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Fussell</td>
<td>Thank God for the Atomic Bomb (Module 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niccolo Macchiavelli</td>
<td>The Prince (excerpt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Stuart Mill</td>
<td>On Liberty (full text) (Modules 6 &amp; 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plato</td>
<td>The Cave (Module 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Paul Sartre</td>
<td>Existentialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven Jay Gould</td>
<td>Darwin’s Middle Road (Module 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac Assimov</td>
<td>Eureka (Module 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl Sagan</td>
<td>Beasts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Regan</td>
<td>The Case for Animal Rights (Module 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neil Postman</td>
<td>Virtual Students, Digital Classroom (Module 11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.2.5 Course objectives

During the introductory session, the course coordinator very clearly established the course objectives, describing the content as “argumentative prose,” prose which requires a “critical, thoughtful” reading and response. During the course students were to engage in reading of argumentative prose essays, analyzing them in order to better understand how arguments are structured in order to appeal to and persuade readers. Students were expected to formulate critical responses to the texts, keeping in mind how best to convey their ideas to as many people as possible, and framing their posts with the objective of attracting a response. The course coordinator explained that the on-line format “really helps in this process.” In addition to being particularly well suited to the content, it gives students the opportunity to “share thoughts.” He encouraged students to share their ideas and to apply the arguments in the essays they read to “contemporary issues.”

In explaining the requirements for postings, the course coordinator emphasized that a posting does not need to resemble a carefully structured essay or paragraph. He encouraged students to share ideas not yet “carefully formulated,” to post in response to others, and to create “deep threads” and engage in dialogue. He stressed the importance of challenging and resisting the ideas in the essays and the didactic materials on the website rather than passively accepting them as given truths, and he encouraged students to read and post in the commentary and argumentative strategies sections of the website. He also encouraged students to use the “Passing Notes” section of the website to raise “sideline issues” that might not be directly related to the texts, commenting that often the “most interesting things” happen in this part of the website.

The introductory homepage makes the same points and clearly conveys connection between the texts chosen for the course and its overall goals and aims:

A number of the essays we have chosen emphasize the value of individual thought, opinion, and choice—as opposed to unthinking acceptance of a majority viewpoint. So there is a relationship between, on the one hand, the values and assumptions of what you will be reading and, on the other hand, the goals and methods of the course itself, which encourage you to formulate and express your own opinions.

This was reiterated in an interview with the course coordinator, when he described his most important objective for the course as giving students a venue in which they could

- speak up... to... express their views and to be respectful of other people's views... and to value... the conflict of ideas... the encounter of opposing ideas... to resist orthodoxy and... not just to run with the herd.
He observed that the on-line environment facilitated the type of student interaction and engagement that he felt was most productive

the on-line learning works . . . I would say brilliantly as a way of . . . encouraging students to share their views . . . to encounter other people's views . . . and respond to fellow students in a . . . vigorous but respectful way.

1.3 Review of the literature

As this study looks at learning and academic writing in an online course, the review of the literature has examined research from different fields, each of which has been used to situate and explicate the findings: 1) the rationale for and implementation of e-learning in higher education; 2) online learning and knowledge-building discourse; 3) research findings on the advantages and disadvantages of online learning; 4) online learning and theories of learning; 4) research studies of courses developed according to constructivist views of learning; 5) academic literacy practices and academic genres; and 6) notions drawn from Bourdieu which are relevant to the findings of this study.

1.3.1 e-learning and higher education

1.3.1.1 Changing universities and changing needs

A range of social and economic factors has contributed to an educational climate in which universities are challenged to meet demands for access to higher education by a growing and increasingly diverse student population. While rising tuition forces students to remain in school longer, at the same time, the demands of a knowledge-based economy increase the need for higher education. Based on data obtained from student surveys conducted in 2001 and 2004 at the University of British Columbia and a survey given to graduating students in 200 and 2004, Tanya Boulova (2005) and her colleagues concluded that "due to higher tuition fees and costs of education many students seek employment and therefore spend more time on education than they did only a decade ago while enrollment continues to grow" (p. 1). Additional demands are placed on universities by rising enrolment of mature students and professionals who return to university for advanced degrees and professional certification. This "current educational climate" has challenged universities to "introduce teaching and learning strategies" and "forms of delivery that increase access to learning opportunities" for "a larger and more diverse cross-section of the population" (Hicks, Reid, & Rigmor, 2001, p. 143).

The "current educational climate" is not limited to the Canadian context. As Jones and O'Shea, J. (2004), note, the "increasing number of students, pressure from the government to achieve higher levels of performance, competitive marketplace, reduced government funding, and changing patterns of students" (p.373) are equally
characteristic of universities in the UK. They cite American educational researchers Drucker (1993) and Oakley (1997), who predicted that, "unless universities change radically they will cease to exist in the twenty first century" (p. 373).

Among the many problems universities face in the light of increased demand for higher education is lack of classroom space. In a report on prepared for the University of British Columbia, Tanya Boulova (2005) notes that "many Canadian universities are unable to meet the increasing demand for higher education because of a lack of adequate instructional facilities" (p. 1), adding that, based on statistics obtained from the AUCC, "it has been estimated that by 2011, universities in Canada will need collectively to respond to a projected 20-30% increase in demand (p. 1).

Universities faced with increased financial constraints and demand for access have turned to new technologies, including digital technology, "improve productivity," "manage planned growth," offer the curriculum in streamlined formats, and "provide access for an increasingly heterogeneous student population" (Helm, 1997, p. 41, cited in Jones & O'Shea. 2004, p. 380). The development and increased use of on-line formats such as BlackBoard WebCT have offered new means of delivery.

E-learning offers many potential benefits besides easing the burden on demands for classroom space and providing increased access to a wider student population. In a global view of recent changes in university education, Nicholas Burbules (2000) reviews the four potential advantages of incorporating new technologies in college and university education as outlined by Nigel Blake, including the democratization of higher learning by increased access for students from a wide variety of backgrounds, increased numbers and more customized programs to meet specific student needs, and the "increased quantity and quality of student-student interaction and cooperative learning" afforded by the on-line environment (para 23).

At the same time, Burbules critiques the "language of 'performativity,' of "efficiency and cost-effectiveness" which "has become the bottom-line rationale for higher education" (para 3), and warns that "there has been little reflection on the characterization of new technologies as an alternative 'delivery system' for college and university courses and programs," or recognition of the limitations of the "delivery system" metaphor. He reminds educators that "teaching is not just a delivery system—in pedagogy, form reshapes content" (para 1), and calls for "more creative, and more intellectually respectable uses of these technologies" in order to "preserve spaces in which more personal (and less "cost-effective" forms of teaching) can also survive" (para 4). Interaction, between faculty and students, and between students, is at the heart of Burbules's vision, as increased opportunities for interaction result in "broadening the
study is of an online course in which was created to preserve the "personal space" which Burbules argues is central to the kind of university education we want to foster, I have cited Burbules at length.

**1.3.1.2 Mixed-mode and hybrid on-line courses**

One of the ways in which universities have found to combine the advantages of online and face-to-face learning is the development of courses in which face-to-face and online instruction are blended. In Canada, these are termed "mixed-mode" course, while in the United States, they are called "hybrid" courses, reflecting the mixed nature of the instructional approaches.

In a summary of approaches used at the University of California, which has been in the forefront in the development of online and hybrid courses, Murphy (2002) concluded that hybrid courses maximize "the advantages of both face-to-face and virtual modes of instruction" (para 6), and quotes leaders in the hybrid movement who "have found that students in hybrid courses do better than students in traditional face-to-face or totally online courses" (para 8). Dr. Harry Matthews, who has developed and taught a wide range of courses in medicine at the University of California, Davis, comments that "[b]uilding a rich college experience based on hybrid instruction means giving students timely individual attention in well designed and delivered learning opportunities that combine the best uses of technology with the best uses of face-to-face time" (para 4), while at the same time "as student enrollment grows, costs for hybrid courses grow more slowly than costs for traditional lecture courses" (para 5). In a newsletter devoted to teaching with technology, Sands (2002) proclaims: "Hybridity is the order of the day, as teachers combiner the distributed teaching and learning of distance education with the comfortable interaction of the classroom in a synthesis of the two" (para 1).

In its annual review of Canadian universities, "Macleans" magazine described the effects of record numbers of incoming students, including a "space squeeze of unprecedented proportions," which "raised concerns about the quality of the university learning experience" in which "all too often, students are forced to sit passively in lectures, rather than being actively engaged" (November 17, 2003, p. 33). On-line courses, and mixed-mode courses in particular, offer one way to simultaneously provide access to students without increasing the "space squeeze," maintain the quality of the university learning experience, and foster student engagement and involve students in active learning.

**1.3.2 Knowledge-building and knowledge-building discourse**

Andriessen, Baker, and Suthers (2003) situate their discussion of argumentation and computer-supported learning in relation to the transition from an 'information age' to
a ‘knowledge age’ in which the goal of education is to enable learners to produce new knowledge. Just as Marlene Scardamalia and Carl Bereiter (1996) formulate their concept of “knowledge building discourse” in relation the development of scientific knowledge and new discoveries through collaboration, argument, and criticism, Andriessen, Baker, and Suthers insist that “knowledge lies less in databases than in people, and has to be disclosed by some form of collective activity,” so that learners must “be engaged in collaborative activities that produce new knowledge” (p. 1). They envision new technologies that “will support collaborative learning, by supporting the practice of meaning making in the context of joint activity” (p. 2), and envision this as “any form of collaborative activity that involves confronting cognitions and their foundations” (p. 2). Learning activities which facilitate this process include diagramming a reasoning process, debate, and shared or collaborative writing. They envision learning, therefore, as an collaborative process in which learners are actively engaged.

Gordon Wells makes a similar argument, one based on Vygotsky’s theory of learning, arguing that instructional practices must reflect the evolution from positivist views of knowledge reflected in a transmission model of education in which “the practices of instruction and assessment” ensure that students “acquire the knowledge that is considered most useful and important” (pp 174-175) to constructivist views in which “what is known by any individual is the outcome of a continuing constructive process that depends on opportunities to encounter and make sense of challenging new experiences” (p. 176). Such a view of knowledge as “knowing in action” must provide learners with “opportunities for reflecting on what has been learned in the process.” Learning, therefore, involves both action and reflection (p. 181). Wells emphasizes the “transformative goals of education “that both inducts learners “into the values and practices that characterize such a society” and equips them “with the knowledge and skills for productive participation” (p. 173). Education, therefore, is not a matter of educating students but of educating citizens.

1.3.3 Advantages of computer-mediated communication (CMC) instruction

Since the late 1990s, there has been an increasing interest in using computer-mediated communication to support instruction. Researchers have studied both synchronous and asynchronous communication, and a great deal of attention has been paid to the advantages of asynchronous CMC in particular. Asynchronous, or delayed-time computer-mediated conferencing, provides learners with opportunities to reflect on and process information (Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 2000;Harasim, 1990), articulate and
reflect on their own perspectives in order to share them with others (Harasim, 1993; Crook, 1994), and learn from others' perspectives. “Answering requests for clarification and assimilating responses that disagree” enables students to “refine” their ideas (Harasim, 1990, p. 45; Student comments and observations are logged, providing a permanent record of individual student development and student interactions and debates. Harasim (1990) summarizes the advantages of online communication in generating, connecting, and articulating ideas, but noted that they promoted linear thinking, and that it can be difficult to develop the frameworks more commonly associated with convergent thinking and connectivist theories of knowledge building such as networks, concept maps, and semantic webs in online formats (Davis & Brewer, 1997, p. 72).

Judith Lapadat (2000) studied a graduate education course which was given entirely online. She found that through reflection and discussion, participants elaborated and extended “practice-relevant themes,” achieving “deeper levels of understanding” may have been achieved, in part, because the nature of online written discourse, as compared to oral discourse or forms of writing.” She theorized that “the permanence of print . . . permits students to look back, reflect, compose and revise,” which leads to “more higher order thinking, and . . . potentially deeper understandings” (p. 20).

Hedberg (2006) cites Jonassen’s (1996) emphasis the role of digital technology in stimulating the thinking processes of learners, “an approach termed cognitive tools or mindtools,” which enables learners to “construct their understanding of phenomena” (p. 176), Drawing upon the “concept of cognitive amplification” formulated by Wells and Chang-Wells, Mark Warschauer (1997) defines it “as a process in “a written text serves as a ‘cognitive amplifier’ of thought:” as writers capture insights for further reflection and examination (p. 471), and a stimulus for interaction with others as texts are shared with peers. In Warschauer’s view, this offers unlimited possibilities for learning as “[s]tudents’ own interactions can now become a basis for “epistemic engagement” (p. 472), as Gordon Wells (1990) formulates it, a mode of engagement with a text in which knowledge is extended and modified by reading, interrogation, evaluation, revision, and response to texts; in other words, the way in which knowledge is conceptualized and disseminated in academia.

Gordon Wells (2001) also views online discourse as offering possibilities for “knowledge-building dialogue” in which learners contribute to an “ongoing dialogue” in which they “respond to, and build on, the contributions of others,” while at the same time, through the act of writing, they must “make an extended, fully worked-out contribution” in which they adopt “a more reflective and self-critical stance.” In Well’s
view, by writing an online text, writers engage in “a dual dialogue: with the audience to whom the text is addressed and with himself through dialogue with the emerging text.” Through the act of reading, learners engage responsively with others’ texts, “therefore, understanding develops through using the texts, both those of others and one’s own as generators of meaning” (p. 186).

1.3.4 **Theories of learning and computer-mediated communication**

David Huang (2001) reviews theories of learning, including situated cognition, constructivism and social constructivism, focusing on the role of language and interaction in learning. He defines the term “discourse community” as one in which members “carve out” the world in “similar ways” though language, developing “similar ‘anticipations’ about external reality,” so that “human learning” is best understood as a process of human languaging.” The ‘languaging’ process Huang describes encompasses not only reaching consensus and common understanding but also “coordinating action and socializing actors as well” (p. 282). Huang therefore traces a connection between language, interaction, community, and action in his view of learning. He then identifies teachers’ roles in each theory and calls for fewer individualized computer-based applications and more “social constructivistic environments fostering knowledge construction” (p. 284).

Ravenscroft (2001) gives an overview of the “learning processes and interactions” that can be supported by educational technology in order to create e-learning environments that provide “truly stimulating, supporting, and favouring innovative learning interactions that are linked to conceptual development” (section 2, para 2). He reviews relevant theories of learning, including behaviorism, cognitive and social constructivism, and activity theory, describing computer programs developed in accordance with each framework, their advantages and disadvantages. He is particularly interested in computer-based tutoring programs which have attempted to foster learning through knowledge negotiation and collaboration which have been developed in conjunction with studies of student interaction and dialogue and concludes that programs based on models of collaborative argument have resulted in a number of successful designs.

1.3.5 **Advantages of computer-supported learning**

1.3.5.1 **Dialogue, scaffolding, and multiple perspectives**

The increasing use of digital technology in education challenges instructors and those involved in course and curriculum development to make learning an interactive and
collaborative experience that is guided by a social constructivist approach to learning. This approach regards individual cognition as occurring within a social context and suggests that collaboration between individuals in a social learning environment is an essential aspect of any educational experience. According to Berg and Collins (1995), these new technologies emphasize that "as an agent for socialization and collaboration, the networked computer has an even greater potential in education for providing an active environment for social learning." Curtis & Lawson (2001) define such learning as "planning, contributing and seeking input, initiating activities, providing feedback, sharing knowledge" (p. 2), while Hendriks and Maor (2001) add that in addition to most common behavior is sharing and comparing information, individuals are engaged in negotiating meaning and applying newly constructed knowledge which required reflection.

Bereiter and Scardamalia define 'dialogic literacy' as the ability to engage productively in discourse whose purpose is to generate new knowledge and understanding, in contrast to 'functional literacy': the ability to comprehend and use communication media to serve the purposes of everyday life. Dialogic literacy is thus, in their view, the "fundamental literacy" for a knowledge society and "educational policy needs to be shaped so as to make it a prime objective" (2005, Para 7).

Researchers and theorists agree that dialogue fosters learning. One popular metaphor, which is drawn from Vygotsky's (1978) theory that learners could move from a "base level of achievement" (p. 86) to a higher level of achievement through interaction with more experienced peers, is the scaffold. Charles Crook (1994) defines a scaffold as a learning situation in which "expert" and "novice" or "are engaged in a collaborative enterprise that requires "coordinated problem-solving“ (p. 49) through which learners internalize new concepts and make new meanings. Crook is primarily concerned with identifying specific ways in which digital technology can be used to facilitate peer interaction that stimulates (1) articulation; (2) conflict; and (3) co-construction of knowledge (p. 133).

Choi, Land, and Turgeon, (2005) view online environments as those which facilitate peer scaffolding as "peer interactions potentially expand learners' awareness of what they need to learn" and force them to "consider alternative perspectives" which may, in turn, enable them to "articulate gaps in knowledge" and actively seek new information to fill these gaps" (p. 484). They point out that online discussion "has shown promise to promote meaningful interaction, the actual benefits are unclear," as students may not be "deeply or critically engaged in discussion" (p. 485) and feel that "peer questioning strategies " are a valuable means of "supporting students in questioning,
clarifying, summarizing, and predicting through staged discussions” and “successful questioning skills that lead to meaningful peer discussions” (p. 486).

1.3.5.2 Articulation

In addition to scaffolding, many researchers point out the advantage of online courses as learning environments in which peer interaction enables learners to share different perspectives on a problem, justify their perspectives, and arrive at a common perspective through negotiation (Harasim, 1990; Scardamalia and Bereiter, 1996; Choi, Land, & Turgeon, 2005). In addition, peer interaction can “expand learners’ awareness of what they need to learn” as learners are exposed to different perspectives and forced to defend their perspectives so that “[o]nce learners articulate gaps in knowledge, they may actively seek new information to fill these gaps” (Choi, Land, & Turgeon, A., 2005. pp 483-484).

Online learning provides learners with opportunities to articulate knowledge, both by formulating ideas in writing and by sharing them with others. Linda Harasim defines articulation as “a cognitive act in which the student presents, defends, develops, and refines ideas,” (p. 56). Koschman, Kelso, Feltovich, and Barrows (1996) concur with the importance of articulation as “giving utterance to force a cohesive explanation and interrelating of concepts and relationships in a manner which ‘forces the learner to take a stand on his or her knowledge in the presence of peers’” (p. 93) through a process which involves abstracting the principles “from the various contexts in which they are embedded,” viewing concepts from diverse perspectives, and establishing relationships between concepts, all of which requires a “cognitive effort” which “provides practice in cognitive flexibility” (p. 94). Crook (1994) feels that the online environment is one in which “problem-solving encounters in which thinking gets publicly articulated” can be fostered, but adds, “exactly how the benefit of this experience is mediated remains to be demonstrated” (1994. p. 135). Light and Light (1999) found in a study of supplementary email forums “introduced into first year courses as an optional extra,” (p. 165) that “an unanticipated feature . . . was that it rendered the other students’ levels of attainment or ability more visible” and the students became concerned about issues of self-presentation which made them formulate their contributions with more care” (p. 175). They concluded that, despite a certain anxiety about the quality of their posts, the result was a positive one, as the students articulated their ideas with more clarity.

1.3.5.3 Critical thinking

Educators agree that “changes in the American and global economies will require college graduates who can go beyond critically analyzing the ideas of others to developing new ideas of their own” (Daly, 1995, p. 7). In particular, it is the ability to
articulate ideas which will be of the most value, Daly's call for an education which enables students to "consider a variety of approaches, to arrange the chunks of relevant information developed in the first stage in a variety of configurations—to give themselves, in short, the opportunity to see a new pattern, divine a new approach, generate a new idea (pp 10-11) echoes the theorists who focused on the role of articulation in online learning. Several researchers have looked at critical thinking and online learning specifically.

Sharma and Hannafin. (2004) observe that the "online environment presents special pedagogical challenges for fostering critical thinking (p. 183) and consider careful scaffolding "in the form of Socratic and open-ended questions" an effective strategy, but insist that "scaffolding must be overtly faded to encourage and identify the transfer of metacognitive strategies to related higher order and critical thinking tasks" (p. 184).

Pierce. (2003) summarizes research on higher order thinking in online classes and offers a wide range of specific strategies to promote intellectual development in online classes. He emphasizes the importance of active learning strategies to stimulate knowledge building. Based on research findings, Pierce has concerns that students do not "challenge the authority of the instructor nor argue a position as part of a classroom dialogue" in the same way that they do in a face-to-face environment in which there is an "interpersonal connection"(p. 304) between instructors and students. Pierce also comments that email, unlike academic writing is "neither composed nor structured" (p. 304).

Marttunen, (1997) analyzed email messages in tutor-led and student-led groups to identify whether students employed argumentation and critical thinking skills" which could be "related to mature scientific thinking" in which "one understands the many-dimensional and relative nature of knowledge, is skilled to assess knowledge critically, and is able to form independent grounded opinions" (p. 346) Statistical analysis of the messages showed that "the level of argumentation in the students' messages improved during the e-mail study period" as "during the last half of the studies the students wrote more argumentative texts than during the first half" (p. 357). When he compared the results between seminar groups directed by a tutor and discussion groups which were student-directed, he found more counter-argument in discussion groups than in seminar groups, suggesting that "freedom to be self-directive" rather than under "tutor's control" facilitated "debates and critical interaction between students," and concluded that the "conversational and free-form style of CMC" has great benefit in "producing argumentative discussions" (p. 358).
1.3.6 Constructivist perspectives and online learning

As many educators and theorists have recognized the congruence between social constructivist emphasis on the role of interaction and collaboration in learning, much of literature is concerned with the application of constructivist principles in the development of online learning environments. For example, Pena-Shaff and Nicholls (2003) argue that “[a]ccording to social constructivist theory, learning environments that encourage active participation, interaction, and dialogue provide students with opportunities to engage in a process of knowledge construction as they try to create meaning from new experiences,” incorporating different perspectives through interaction and internalizing new concepts and constructs through “active participation and interaction with the environment as well as with others” (Part 2. Para 1), a process which reflects Vygotsky’s view that “social and cognitive development occur first in the social plane, through interaction of peers and experts (interpsychological sphere)” and are transformed and internalized onto the psychological plane (interpsychological sphere,” (Part 2. Para 2),

Vivian Rossner-Merrill, Drew Parker, Carolyn Mamchur, and Stephanie Chu (1998) reviewed two online courses structured around constructivist learning principles. One is a writing course and the other a business course. The authors specified the constructivist learning principles which governed the course organization and development and explained how the online activities reflected these principles. In the writing course, the students, who are usually working professionals, collaborate using both synchronous and asynchronous systems in a way that “integrates, enhances and expands the development of writing and teaching writing skills” (p. 285). Student feedback has been very positive and students often “drop in” after they have completed the course to work with those currently enrolled. The business students are not professionals and the instructional materials are structured to facilitate cognitive flexibility by “providing multiple representations of new learning” so that students improve their ability to “acquire, represent, and apply sophisticated knowledge” (p. 285). The authors concluded that “constructivist theory offers the grounding principals [sic] to support the design and management of an online course” and provide “opportunities to strengthen the asynchronous learning environment” (p. 287).

Findings on learning outcomes are variable, suggesting that any course needs to be carefully structured to meet the needs of participants, foster collaboration, and ensure that students achieve learning objectives. David Nunan and Ken Beatty focused on computer-mediated collaborative learning, which they defined as learning in which “negotiating with others” is necessary (part 2, para 3). They used video recordings and data on visits made to different resources to compare students working on two different
programs: one a computer interface based on a behaviorist model of instruction and the other based on a constructivist model of instruction. Although the researchers hypothesized would lead to "greater exploration and more instances of collaboration" (abstract), they found little difference, and theorized that true collaboration requires a "maturity, autonomy and functional understanding of the collaborative process" (part 5, para 10) which their participants lacked and concluded that scaffolding is required as a "supportive framework for the learning process" (part 6, para 2).

Similarly, Matthew Hughes and Normal Daykin (2002) focused on the students' perceptions and their pattern of usage in an online nursing management course. They found little evidence of knowledge construction and a "marked reluctance" (p. 220) to criticize others' work.

1.3.7 Research studies of learning and interaction

1.3.7.1 Research findings

Research findings on online interaction, although generally positive, indicate that courses must be carefully structured to foster interaction and student engagement in learning. Linda Harasim (2000) proclaims: "Online course activity based upon asynchronous communication yields an entirely new learning pattern: highly active engagement" (p. 57). Her study, which computed the number of replies to new messages as a measurement of interaction, reported very high interaction rates and a "multiplicity of voices or perspectives" as "students are participating most of the time, unlike traditional classroom situations in which the instructor dominates the airtime with only a few (usually the same) students having an opportunity to ask questions or add comments" (p. 57). Judith Lapadat (2004), who studied interaction in an online graduate education course, reported that "class members became intensely engaged in the course" as they "wrote themselves into new understandings, thereby scaffolding their intellectual work" (p. 240). In particular, students "drew on their own personal and professional experiences to persuade others and to shape group discussions" (p. 247). Her findings supported assertions of Harasim and others about the potential of online formats to create collaborative learning environments.

Henri (1999) notes that on-line interaction is generally equated with participation. Her analysis, therefore, distinguished between explicit (direct answer or comment to another post) and implicit interaction (indirect answer or comment). Henri analysed nearly 300 messages from distance learning teleconferences, and found that, contrary to expectations, the majority of messages were "independent," i.e. not made in reply to another message, and only a small minority of students' messages were parts of...
genuinely interactive exchanges. Henri suggested that computer mediation only serves to echo traditional role relations in education: 'It is exactly as in traditional learning situations: the students speaks; the teachers answers, confirms, approves, reinforces' (1995, p. 158).

Zhu (1996) studied on-line interactions in a graduate distance-learning course. Adopting a constructivist framework, Zhu looked at participation categories, participants' roles, and meaning categories (question, answer, reflection, comment, discussion, information sharing, and scaffolding). Findings demonstrated that most of the contributions were comment, discussion, reflection, information sharing, and scaffolding. Pena-Shaff and Nicholls (2003) studied the weekly online postings on an asynchronous bulletin board system used in a college level course in order to analyze knowledge construction in online discussions. The course was highly student-centered and used the constructivist approach which encouraged collaboration and dialogue. The researchers separated the discussions into threads of interaction and then graphically represented to visualize the flow of interaction. They used content analysis to identify the most common patterns of discourse. The category system they developed was meant to identify the types of statements that were most directly related to knowledge construction, including clarification, interpretation, conflict, assertion, judgment and reflection. Their findings showed that, even when the students were developing ideas, "few threads showed a dialogical process in which ideas and assumptions were discussed" (p. 261). Their analysis of categories of knowledge construction were similar to those used by Zhu. Analysis of interaction patterns showed that "messages seemed to move from a social or interactive sphere to a more individual, self-reflective, sphere" in which students "elaborated and built upon ideas to reach their own interpretations" (p. 261). They commented that this reflected Vygotsky's notion of knowledge construction as socially mediated, moving from the social to the individual level.

Schellens and Valcke (2006) studied a first year course which used online discussion groups of case studies to supplement face-to-face working sessions in which new domain knowledge was presented. The guiding research question for their study was "does collaborative learning in asynchronous discussion groups result in enhancing academic discourse and knowledge construction?" The general results of the study showed that "interaction in the discussion groups becomes more intense, stays task-oriented, and reflects high phases in knowledge construction," and demonstrated that group size and task structure had a definitive impact on "the nature and quality of the discussions and the phases of knowledge construction," as small and average sized
groups perform better and higher phases of knowledge construction are observed within these groups” (section 7, para 1).

Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, and Chang (2003) studied collaborative interactions in an online teacher education program in a Midwestern university to analyze the patterns and types of collaborative interactions taking place in three online classes; and to use the findings as a guide in the design of instructional interventions. They found that students tended to present information rather than engage in discussion, and there were many long posts but relatively few threads or instances in which students developed lines of inquiry presented by peers. Their findings indicated the need for a stronger instructor presence, a “teaching presence” rather than a “teacher presence” in online discussions, as “overt facilitation by instructors plays a critical role in guiding students toward higher levels of learning” (pp 134-135) and to facilitate synthesis and integration of knowledge and viewpoints presented. They also suggested that students self-code their responses to make them more aware of their own thinking strategies. They suggested that instructors participate regularly throughout the discussion and play a more visible role in guiding students toward the achievement of those learning objectives.

Pena-Shaff (2001) analyzed participation, interaction, and meaning construction on a asynchronous bulletin board in a college level course. Like Henri, the researchers distinguished between interactive and non-interactive messages, further categorizing messages in terms of reflective analysis, subjective analysis, task-related, assertion, experiential, topic evaluation, and off-task. Their findings showed that students “tended to use the ideas of others as a starting point for developing their own trend of thought,” and many of the messages resembled “a conversation with the self in which participants posed questions for consideration, and through analysis and argumentation reached their own conclusions about the issue” (p. 55). They concluded that asynchronous online environments “can provide students with opportunities to develop sophisticated cognitive skills” (p. 65).

Fisher (2002)’s study of community formation and online learning looked for ways to support and improve student collaboration in online courses. Her findings showed that requirements that students read and respond to other students posts facilitated the creation of an interactive dialogue between students. Similarly, Lapadat (2000), observed high engagement and participation when she made participation a requirement and gave it a mark, and concluded that making discussion a requirement, making deadlines for posts, and marking participation “may be necessary stimuli to online engagement in webcourses” (p. 8).
Swan, Shea, Fredericksen, & Pickett (2000) looked at “factors affecting the success of asynchronous online learning.” From their review of the literature, they identified “course design factors—consistency in course design, contact with course instructors, and active discussion” which “have been consistently shown to significantly influence the success of online courses,” positing “that the reason for these findings relates to the importance of building knowledge building communities in asynchronous online learning environments. (p. 359). They concluded that “students perceive online education as more equitable and more democratic than traditional classroom discussions” and, in addition, “because it is asynchronous, online discussion affords participants the opportunity to reflect on their classmates’ contributions while creating their own, and on their own writing before posting it” which “tends to create a certain mindfulness among students and a culture of reflection in the course” (p. 362). From their review of previous studies, they observed that when instructors overtly place value on discussion and require participation, “findings indicate that interaction among students is an important factor in the success of online courses” (p. 363). Their research study results correlate with this observation: levels of reported satisfaction were correlated with reporting of other factors: a) high levels of interaction correlated with high levels of satisfaction and perceived learning; b) the greater the percentage of the course grade that was based on discussion, the more satisfied the students were, the more they thought they learned from the course, and the more interaction they thought they had with the instructor and with their peers; and c) the greater the percentage of the course grade that was based on cooperative or group work, the less the students thought they learned from the course (p. 375). Swan, Shea, Fredericksen, and Pickett concluded that “this combination of factors . . . jointly support the growth of what Scardamalia and Bereiter call “knowledge-building communities” (p. 379) in which “knowledge building . . . takes place through discussion” in which “meanings are agreed upon, ideas negotiated, concepts evolved, knowledge constructed.” As the researchers noted, this is a time-consuming and challenging activity; therefore, “for students to involve themselves . . . they must believe it is both valued and authentic”; [t]hus, “an asynchronous online course in which discussion counts for a significant percentage of the course grade, in which frequent participation in discussion is required, and in which discussion topics are both open and well specified are more successful than those in which it is not” (p. 380).

Jarvela and Hakkinen (2002) looked at students’ ability to adopt different perspectives in an online environment. Defining perspective taking as “the ability to see the world from another person’s perspective or infer another’s capabilities, attributions, expectations, feelings, and potential reactions” (p. 6), they analyzed online discussion to
discover whether discussion through “global networked technologies” could “raise interpersonal understanding” and “educationally valuable higher-level discussion” corresponded to “high-level perspective taking” (p. 15). Their findings confirmed that online discussion could facilitate perspective taking.

Sunghee Shin and Eun Kyeong Cho’s (2003) study of the discussion boards in four graduate education courses focused on the students’ perception of the culture of the online community in order to understand the role of the cultural aspects of interaction in knowledge production. Their findings demonstrate the importance of interaction: students who received no responses or felt their ideas were ignored, lost interest in participating. As a result, the discussion board became a “delivery system” or a repository of class notes rather than a forum for collaboration and exchange.

Lapadat (2004)’s study of interactive writing in an online graduate education course showed that “class members became intensely engaged in the course” as they “wrote themselves into new understandings, thereby scaffolding their intellectual work, and, in particular, students “drew on their own personal and professional experiences to persuade others and to shape group discussions” (p. 240). Her findings supported assertions by Harasim and others about the potential of online formats to create collaborative learning environments.

Lapadat pointed out that the most important feature of this format is its interactivity. Through online interaction “reading and writing were being employed discursively as a means of focusing members of a virtual classroom community on matters of joint interest, posing and suggesting solutions to problems, and theorizing about connections between theory, practice and policy, all of which Lapadat felt “nudged participants toward epistemic usage of text” (p. 246). Indeed, many of the researchers interested in online learning have drawn upon Well’s (1990) notion “epistemic engagement with written text” as

a tentative and provisional attempt on the part of the writer to capture his or her current understanding in an external form so that it may provoke further attempts at understanding as the writer or some other reader interrogates the text in order to interpret its meaning, (p. 373)

Although many researchers and theorists view digital technology as a means of facilitating collaborative, constructivist approaches to learning, learner engagement, and interaction, such technologies also lend themselves to traditional transmission styles of teaching and learning as well. Hedberg (2006) reported on a major survey of five large technological universities in Australia done in 2005. Results showed that “for most students and teachers e-learning was little more than the provision of information and
“even those learning activities that went beyond information provision were considered limited interactions, with little thought as to what the discussion was meant to achieve” (p. 171), concluding that despite the calls for technology to revolutionize teaching and learning practices, “it does not seem to have replaced the dominant paradigms” but has simply made transmission easier (p. 175).

1.3.7.2 Teacher’s roles

In this student-centered, collaborative, view of online learning, what role does the teacher play? Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, and Chang (2003) felt that a “teaching presence” was required to guide students to higher levels of critical thinking, synthesis and integration of information. Maor’s (2003) qualitative case study defined several roles that online instructors play, including: a) pedagogical role, in which the instructor actively fosters collaboration; b) social role, which involves asking questions, providing feedback and instruction, synthesizing comments, and referring to outside sources; 3) managerial/technical role, including keeping discussion going, helping with website problems, setting guidelines and criteria, providing support, and intervening in discussions if needed.

Maor analyzed tasks involved and noted that although developing reflective thinking was a primary instructional goal for both instructor and students, more time was spent on other tasks and more scaffolding and strategies to facilitate reflection were needed.

Mazzolini and Maddison (2003) distinguish between two possible teacher roles: the constructivist “guide,” or low-profile “ghost.” Their study investigated the rate at which instructors posted and initiated discussions and correlated this with student responses and results of a student survey on their educational experience. The results showed that instructor presence influenced student participation: while instructors who posted frequently were judged to be more enthusiastic and expert than those who did not, it was found that frequent posting by instructors was often followed by fewer student posts and shorter on-line discussions.

1.3.8 Academic literacy practices and academic genres

1.3.8.1 Origins of academic genres

In an essay on literacy and the oral foundations of education, Kieran Egan reminds us that the Greek word ‘logos,’ which meant ‘word’ or ‘speech,’ was also the word for ‘reason’ (Egan, 1991, p. 177). Rationality, much valued by the Greeks, was constructed as knowledge articulated from a disengaged perspective, one which informs
our current notions of literacy, notions which are primarily equated with written language. As the development of writing systems has enabled us to articulate and preserve meanings, theories of literacy development often view the development of modern academic disciplines as predicated on written texts (Goody, 1977 and Ong, 1982 cited in Wells, 1990, p. 371). Education, therefore, has privileged written texts and literacy practices in which individuals engaged with texts, interpreting and producing them as a means of developing reason. Egan is also concerned with the role of literacy as a cognitive function, a set of strategies that are "not only utilitarian, but also bon à pensé" (Egan, 1991, p. 180)—not only good to think about, but good to think with.

In his essay "From Utterance to Text," David Olson (1991) terms the invention of the printing press an "evolution in the explicitness of writing" at the graphemic and semantic level. Texts were assumed to embody "autonomous representations of meaning" and this principle was "reflected in the way texts were both read and written" (p. 162). The primary function of schooling was, therefore, to facilitate the comprehension and production of written texts.

According to Olson, the genesis of the essay, the academic genre with which we are most familiar, was in empiricism and the desire to codify emerging scientific knowledge. The essay evolved as a structure in which "original theoretical knowledge" could be formulated, a "coherent text," in which ideas were developed in a logical order (p. 163). The emphasis placed on coherence, clarity of thinking, use of discourse markers to show how ideas are related, and precise vocabulary all reflect the empiricist view of knowledge as objective and transmissible. Although we may view knowledge as subjective and constructed, both individually and through interaction with others, we still value coherence and clarity in academic writing.

Linda Flower (1994) uses the term "literacies" to encompass the "diverse discourse practices that grow out of the needs and values of different communities" (p. 2), drawing attention to the act of composition as a constructive, cognitive process in which writers juggle conflicting demands and negotiate "alternative goals, constraints, and possibilities" (p. 2) through the act of writing. Writers produce texts within the context of a community, with its particular conventions and expectations, yet at the same time, they are constructing and negotiating meaning, interpreting, organizing, selecting, and connecting information, drawing inferences, imagining options, all of which are "conscious, strategic actions" (p. 24). Therefore text features, discourse practices, social practices, and cognition come together in the act of writing. Flower's theory of writing is termed a "social cognitive theory" because it attempts to encompass individual
cognition and the social context, and to provide writing instructors with a different way of understanding and assessing student writing.

The academic essay (in various forms, including the research paper, essay exam, university entrance exam, TOEFL and IELTS exam) remains the prominent text through which students are assessed in higher education and epitomizes the “Western tradition of academic writing” based on “precepts of rhetorical structure” and “assumptions that the writer will scrupulously pursue truth in argument and narration, strict accuracy in ascertainable fact, lucidity in exposition” (Nash, 1990, p. 28, cited in Turner, 1999, p. 154). In short, academic literacy is influenced by an intellectual tradition “which has shaped expectations of language use,” (p. 155) which are often unclear to students and poorly articulated by instructors.

Like Flower, Lea and Street (1998) use the terminology “literacy practices” to as a framework to discuss academic writing. Lea and Street point out that students are not just learning “study skills” when they seek help with their writing assignments. Rather, they are being enculturated into specific literacy practices which often vary from discipline to discipline. Lea and Street’s research, which examined the writing practices in different subject areas from students and academic staff points of view, pointed out that it was “issues of epistemology” rather than the actual “surface features” of the writing which made a piece of writing better. In other words, “underlying disciplinary assumptions about the nature of knowledge affected the meaning given the terms ‘structure’ and ‘argument’” (p. 162) which were used to evaluate student writing, and, in fact, instructors were not able to explicate terms like ‘analyse’ or ‘evaluate’ although they used them when describing a well written assignment. Lea and Street also found considerable differences in evaluation criteria between disciplines, suggesting that when students move between disciplines, they may experience difficulties. Indeed, the students they interviewed reported confusion understanding the requirements in diverse disciplines, poor reception of an essay which employed an approach which had been received favourably in a different discipline, as well as conflicting advice from teaching staff, all of which resulted in student frustration.

Carol Berkenkotter & Thomas Hukin are interested in the role of written communication in academic culture in general, and remind us that such communication is instrumental in the production of knowledge, the dissemination of new knowledge, and the day-to-day tasks which comprise academics’ time. Academic writing is not limited to the formal essay, although this is one of the genres with which all university students are expected to become familiar. Diverse disciplines use different academic genres (lab reports, journal articles, reviews, grant applications, etc) to codify and communicate new
knowledge, to package and communicate information in accordance with disciplinary norms, values, and ideology while at the same time constituting those norms through the social practices involved (Berkenkotter & Hukin, 1995, p. 4). They have used linguistic analysis of case study data and the documents produced in order to understand how individuals are enculturated into academic discourse and genres in different disciplines. They looked at the production and peer review process in scientific journal articles, the evolution of a scholarly forum into an academic journal, characteristics of successful conference proposals, as well as an in-depth case study of a first year doctoral student's "growing understanding of the registers and other conventions of the academic discourse" shared by members of the disciplinary community which he was in the process of joining.

This study is of particular interest to us, as it was based on a theoretical framework of apprenticeship which will be described in detail in the following chapter. In this framework, the student is viewed as an apprentice who is being enculturated into the practices and conventions of a particular discourse community. By analyzing the student's research papers and the responses he received from instructors, the researchers identified specific linguistic features of his writing which reflected the "conventions of academic writing" (p. 140) required of students in a particular disciplinary program" as well as aspects of his writing which were drawn from other aspects of the student's experience, and which often represented resistance to the demands and conventions of the new discipline which he had entered. In particular, this student's ability to write fluently and expressively when "freed from the constraints of genre and register" (p. 105) enabled him to assimilate new material quickly and easily, but he had trouble switching from the informal register in which he was comfortable to a more formal register expected by his instructors, and, in particular, formulating his observations in the detached, formal manner congruent with the "empirical research methods" (p. 142) required by the discipline in which he was doing his doctoral study. Berkenkotter and Hukin found that these features reflected the student's continuing allegiance to other groups and disciplines to which he belonged, and whose discourses he drew upon in act of composition. They observed that this student was drawing upon and negotiating different and often conflicting discourses and values through the act of writing. Their findings confirm Lea and Street's (1998) observations about the conflicting and poorly articulated criteria in different academic disciplines and the difficulty students have in negotiating them, and are of particular interest in conjunction with Roz's Ivanic's (1998) study of eight mature students and their struggles with academic writing, which will be described at length in a later chapter.
Several researchers have focused on the linguistic aspects of academic writing, and their work will be discussed in detail in later chapters. Ken Hyland (2000) has undertaken an extensive analysis of discourse used in academic journals in order to identify specific linguistic strategies used in different disciplines. The same corpora (Hyland, 2005b) was used in order to identify specific linguistic strategies used by academics in order to position themselves in relation to their content and their readers. He has also compared specific features of texts by students and professional academics (Hyland, 2002). Hewings and Hewings (2004) also used large corpora of texts to compare specific linguistic features doctoral dissertations and journal articles, while Coffin (2004) looked specifically at interpersonal features of academic essays in the IELTS examination and Coffin and Hewings (2005) examined the linguistic features of argumentation in electronic conferences. They concluded that “[e]ngagement in argumentative dialogue where it is possible to reread and reflect on different argumentative positions (and particularly when directed in the form of structured tasks) may facilitate the incorporation of different positions into students’ own argumentative line,” but that students often limit “the degree of argumentative interplay between the opinions and views put forward” and “appear to be reluctant to challenge their peers” (p. 47). Through this brief overview, we have seen the variety and complexity of the issues involved under the rubric of “academic genre” or “academic discourse.” We will conclude with a look at studies of academic writing in online environments.

1.3.8.2 Academic literacy and writing in online environments

Lapadat (2000; 2004) and Lea (2001) both studied online graduate courses. Results of their studies have been previously mentioned and will be discussed in detail in conjunctions with findings from this study in later chapters.

Mark Warschauer (1999, 2002) focused specifically on the use of technology in teaching academic writing. Observing that “[t]echnology does not constitute a method; rather, it is a resource that can be used to support a variety of approaches and methods,” (p. ), Warschauer studied three very different classroom settings in which technology was used in different ways. In one classroom, it was used effectively to scaffold students’ “entry into the world of academic discourse” (conclusion, para 1).

Warschauer cites Harris (1989), who points out

The borders of most discourses are hazily marked and often travelled, and...the communities they define are thus often indistinct and overlapping...One does not step cleanly and wholly from one community to another, but is caught instead in an always changing mix of dominant, residual, and emerging discourses (p. 17, cited in Warschauer, 2002, conclusion).

Warschauer observed that through the use of digital technology, students "could put out their own experiences in a written form that other students and the teacher could reflect on and respond to," and that "this proved to be a powerful tool for assisting students in invention and reinvention, discovery and exploration, reflection and negotiation—enhancing students' opportunities to think critically about the academy and their role in it. Computer-mediated communication was not the only means by which the process of critical reflection occurred, but it did seem to be an effective medium for facilitating this process" (conclusion, para 4).

Warschauer also noted that the students began networking through online interactions, developing a sense of community and affiliation with others when they could share problems and experiences with them.

Warschauer notes that students in composition classes usually find themselves "are almost always writing with an ultimately unreal rhetorical purpose, seeking not to persuade or inform or entertain but to complete an assignment in a required course" (Heilker, 1997, p. 71, cited in Warschauer, 1999, p. 140). Both Lapadat (2004) and Warschauer observed improvement in student writing when the students wrote for a real audience rather than just for their teacher. While the students in Lapadat's study wrote for one another, they shared problems and worked together to develop connections between educational theory and classroom practice. The students in one of the classes in Warschauer's study created web pages and other documents for community organizations, putting more effort into their writing and finding more satisfaction with the product.

Warschauer draws upon Bakhtin's dialogical perspective in order to "gain perspective on the apparent dichotomies that exist between the constructivist approach—based on writing as an individual cognitive process—and the social constructionist approach, which sees writing as conforming to the norms of a discourse community" (conclusion para 7). Warschauer observes that Bakhtin's view of discourse "as a forum where the forces of individual cognition and social ideology and convention 'dialectically interpenetrate' each other in a co-constitutive relationship" (Volosinov, 1929/1973, p. 41, cited in Warschauer, 2000, conclusion, para 7) perhaps is best realized "in the era of online communication":

when students can most readily and rapidly appropriate the discourse of others into their language use. Students need no longer choose between the advantages of speech (which allows rapid interaction) and of writing (which maintains a
permanent record for reflection). Rather, using the speech-writing hybrid of computer-mediated discussion, their own discussion takes a written form, thus allowing students' interaction to itself become the basis of epistemic engagement (Warschauer, 1997).

This review of the literature, which has moved from the social and economic affecting university education and creating increasing demand for innovative, effective online courses to a view of online communication as the realization of Bakhtinian dialogic relations, demonstrates the complexity of the issues we are addressing when we investigate online learning. In our analysis of online interaction in a particular course, we will revisit issues of language, cognition, academic literacy practices and genres, critical thinking, interaction and interpersonal relations, as well as Bakhtin’s notions of dialogue and appropriation.

1.3.9 Bourdieu’s notions of “legitimacy,” “symbolic capital,” and “cultural capital”

Drawn from Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital, the words “legitimacy” and “capital” are imbued with Marxist ideology and with the many ways in which Bourdieu’s theoretical framework has been appropriated to situate and interpret recent research. Bourdieu defines capital not in terms of economic capital, but as symbolic capital, a form of capital which, though material in nature, is not recognized as such:

Symbolic capital, a transformed and thereby disguised form of physical ‘economic’ capital, produces its proper effect inasmuch, and only inasmuch, as it conceals the fact that it originates in ‘material’ forms of capital which are also, in the last analysis, the source of its effects (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 183)

For Bourdieu, it was symbolic forms, including language, dress codes, body postures, and the messages conveyed by objects were “instruments of knowledge and domination” (Mahar, Harker & Wilkes, 1990, p. 5), through which ‘legitimate’ definitions of the social world could be imposed. Bourdieu used the term ‘symbolic violence’ to describe the struggle between symbolic systems to impose conflicting perceptions of the social world and to ‘legitimate’ them of capital broadens the notion of economic capital to include material objects, which may have symbolic value or confer prestige, status, or authority upon those who possess it (Mahar, Harker, & Wilkes, 1990, p. 13). Bourdieu includes material objects (and the symbolic prestige or authority they may convey), prestige, status, and authority, and cultural capital in his definition: “all the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 178).

We are particularly interested in Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital, the “culture of the elite, (Harker, 1990, p. 87), which comprises familiarity and understanding of the
achievements defined as "the best" by the dominant class. Cultural competence is defined by familiarity with such achievements, and it is obtained through courses entitled "Civilization," "Great Works of Art," or "Great Works of Literature." Like economic capital, cultural capital conveys legitimacy, a legitimacy regulated by institutions within the society, and specifically by academic institutions.

Cultural capital also serves as a major factor in class definition. In order to maintain the legitimacy of cultural capital, the educational system creates a market in cultural capital with certificates as the currency. (Garnham & Williams, 1990, cited in Lane Lawlor). Therefore, in Bourdieu's framework, the educational system itself, and particularly academia, is implicated in maintenance of the economic and social class system. In Bourdieu's framework, academia functions to legitimate cultural capital and has a considerable stake in continuing to ensure its legitimacy, and children of the socioeconomic elite receive "both more of and the right kind of cultural capital for socioeconomic success" (Lin, 1999, 394), while children from disadvantaged families receive less, thereby reproducing social stratification.

1.4 Research Design

1.4.1 Rationale

The design of this study employs qualitative methodology with discourse analysis. The term "qualitative" is a very broad one and has many connotations. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) define it as an approach in which researchers "study things in their natural settings" in order to "make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). Erickson (1990) characterizes classrooms as "socially and culturally organized environments for learning." Furthermore, they are "reflexive learning environment[s]" in which the "meaning-making perspectives" of teachers and learners contribute to the "educational process" (p. 79), so qualitative methodology enables us to understand the perspectives and meanings that teachers and learners bring to classrooms.

Similarly, the term "discourse" has been used in many contexts and conveys a variety of meanings. Schiffrin (1994) defines discourse as a system through which particular functions are realized. Analysis of discourse, therefore, determines the purposes of the discourse, and the various meanings, including social, cultural, and interpersonal meanings, which it may convey. As an analytic framework, systemic functional linguistics (SFL) views language as a system of meaning in which the functions of language are realized within and inseparable from the social contexts in which interactions take place. Systemic functional linguistics is primarily concerned with the
ways in which language is used for particular purposes in particular contexts, examining the linguistic features of the discourse in order to identify the ways in which they

The purpose of this study was to obtain an ethnographic perspective from instructors’ and students’ perspectives on how learning was facilitated in this context. The focus of the analysis was the online discourse. All the data obtained in this study, including on-line discourse, face-to-face interactions between learners and between instructors and learners, and interview data, was used to obtain an “insider’s perspective” on learning from learners and instructors’ viewpoints in the context of this particular situation. The primary analytical tool was discourse analysis of the online dialogue. Dialogue is central to an ethnographic perspective as:

Within any social setting, and any social scene within a setting, whether great or small, social actors are carrying on a culturally constructed dialogue. This dialogue is expressed in behavior, words, symbols, and in the application of cultural knowledge to make instrumental activities and social situations work for one. We learn the dialogue as children and continue learning it all our lives, as our circumstances change. This is the phenomenon we study as ethnographers—the dialogue of action and interaction (Spindler & Spindler, 1987, p. 2, cited in Gee, & Green, 1998, p. 126).

Discourse analysis, therefore, is a means of identifying the social practices in which members of a social group participate, and, in the case of classroom discourse, “how discourse shapes both what is available to be learned and what is, in fact, learned” (Gee & Green, 1998, p. 126).

Potter and Wetherall (1990) remind us that, because “much of the time we deal with the world in terms of discursive constructions or version,” “our access to world events, the findings of science, or how a particular film should be evaluated are via constructions in texts and talk,” analysis of discourse reveals “the actual working of discourse as a constitutive part of social practices situated in specific contexts” (para 2). Discourse analysis was used, therefore, to understand “the actual working of discourse” in the constitution of social practices in this particular course.

1.4.2 Data Collection

All on-line data was collected, including the introduction to each module, all sections of the module from “Key Terms” to “Making Connections,” posts from all four discussion sections, threads in response to questions posed in all sections of the module, threads in the “Passing Notes” section, the course introduction, overview and description, and timeline). Interviews were conducted with three of the four course TAs, the course coordinator, and the course consultant, who was involved in creation of the course and
was a course TA when the course was first offered in mixed-mode format. Focus group interviews were conducted with three groups of students: two groups of two and one group of three. In addition, the researcher attended and observed the formal course introduction at the beginning of the course and a different weekly discussion section and took informal notes on the proceedings to record important points made as well as to observe different pedagogical strategies used in the course, questions posed by the instructor or raised by students, the use of online posts in face-to-face discussion, and to note any other issues that contributed to a better understanding of how students engaged with the texts and with one another as the course proceeded.

1.4.3. Participants in the study

The course coordinator, who developed and was in charge of the course. He also taught the course in traditional lecture format and had done so for many years. He was responsible for choosing many of the readings, although often incorporated texts at the suggestion of others. He read all the online posts, and sometimes responded to posts in the “Commentary” or “Passing Notes” sections, but did not contribute to discussion on the discussion boards. He also visited one of the discussion sections each week and actively participated, often referring to student postings and inviting further reflection and response to the issues raised.

The course consultant, who also developed the course and had taught it twice in mixed-mode format as a teaching assistant (TA). He was not teaching the course during the period in which data was collected but was interviewed for his perspective on the creation of the course, his experience teaching it, and the course aims and objectives.

The TAs, all of whom were graduate students in the English department. Two were second year M.A. students and two were Ph.D. students, one of whom was completing his thesis and the other a first year doctoral student. One TA had taught the course previously in the mixed-mode format and also had done the course evaluation after the course was offered in mixed-mode format for the first time. He was therefore, very knowledgeable about the course objectives and about how the course worked on a daily basis. The other two TAs interviewed were teaching an online course for the first time but had taught first year English fiction before. Three of the four TAs were interviewed. Each TA was responsible for all the postings in his or her discussion board and for leading a weekly face-to-face discussion section. The TAs were also responsible for marking the in-class essay, home essay, and final examinations.
The students, the majority of whom were first or second year university students, but also included many students who were non-native English speakers, mature students, and students from a wide variety of academic disciplines, including history, engineering and business.

1.4.4 Data

Primary sources of information for the study included online transcripts, notes made during classroom observations, and audiotaped interviews. Individual interviews were conducted with the instructors, course coordinator, and course consultant, while focus group interviews were conducted with the students. Secondary sources included documents and on-line questionnaires filled out by the students after the last class.

Individual interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the third month in which the course was offered. The interviewer drew from a set of prepared questions, but let the interviewees focus on the topics that interested them most. Each interview explored a different aspect of the course in detail.

Focus groups: Focus group interviews were conducted with three groups of students: one group of three students, and two groups of two students. The interviews were conducted in the third month of the course, right after the students handed in their home essay assignments and either during the penultimate or final week of classes. Interviews were semi-structured. The interviewer used specific questions as springboards for discussion in order to get the students’ view of participation and learning in the course, but refrained from actively directing the interviews once the students began speaking freely. Issues covered in interviews ranged from when, where, and how students participated online, how they composed their posts, the difference between posts and formal academic writing assignments, the differences between high school and university education, the texts studied in the course, participation in online discussion versus participation in discussion groups, and other issues that emerged during discussion.

1.4.5 The Researcher’s Role

The researcher visited the discussion sections to introduce herself during the second week of the course. At that time, she explained the purpose of the study, distributed information sheets and consent forms. The researcher did not participate actively in the course, but read the online discussions with interest and collected all the online transcripts every week. She also visited each of the discussion sections (after being given permission by the TA leading the section) at least once and took notes on the discussion, greeted the students but did not participate actively in discussion. A handout describing the focus group interviews was circulated during the third month of the course.
for students to sign up if they were interested. The researcher contacted interested students by email to arrange times and dates for the focus group interviews.

### 1.4.6 Data Collection Procedures

Online transcripts were read and collected weekly. The researcher made notes during visits to discussion sections, focusing mainly on the range of approaches the TAs used in discussion sections, how issues or questions that emerged during the online discussion were taken up in discussion section, or issues that were not a focus of online discussion the TAs chose to supplement or to explore in discussion section.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed to identify common issues. As discussed above, the notion of engagement was identified as a common theme and online data was analyzed to identify ways in which the students engaged with peers and with the texts.

### 1.4.7. Overview of the following chapters

In Chapter 2, I will review specific terminology which is used in my discussion in order to clearly define terms. I will also review theoretical perspectives which connect discourse, learning, dialogue, and social practices, and the theoretical model of learning as through apprenticeship in a community of practice. I will also review the concept of argument and argumentation in conjunction with academic writing and literacy practices as the major content of the course in this study is argumentative prose writing and the online discussion was structured as an debate in which the students were asked to develop an argument and present evidence to support it.

In Chapter 3, I look at online discourse to identify discursive strategies writers used to position themselves and their readers in the discourse focused on Mill’s text, including the features of argumentative writing used in student texts, discursive strategies used in the website, and stance, attitude, and modality in student discourse.

In Chapter 4, I focus on the use of evidentials in student writing, comparing the ways in which students employed Mill’s text as evidence to the other types of evidence they used and how they integrated it into their arguments. In particular, I examine issues of identity in relation to academic writing, and look at characteristics of the online environment which facilitate self-expression and integration of different aspects of identity into academic discourse.

In Chapter 5, I summarize the findings in relation to the original research questions and suggest avenues for further exploration.
Chapter 2
Key Issues: Learning, Social Practice, Discourse, Identity, and Argumentation

My analysis of the ways in which learning is facilitated by specific social practices in this particular on-line community is informed by several key theoretical constructs that connect discourse, learning, dialogue, and social practices. Before exploring specific examples drawn from on-line interactions in this course, I would like briefly review the ongoing dialogue between educators and educational researchers regarding learning as a socially constructed process and the role of discourse in learning order to situate my analysis and findings in relation to a model of learning. In particular, I would like to draw connections between learning, discourse, and “engagement,” a term often found in the literature on on-line learning and also used by all instructors in this study frame their learning objectives for the course. I would also like to define some of the terminology which is often used by educational researchers and theorists but which may convey different nuances of meaning when used by different researchers and theorists in order to clearly explain how I understand and use this terminology in relation to this study and to conceptualize how I envision the interaction between participants, discourse, texts, and social practices that facilitate knowledge-building in this discourse community—a community which uses a particular type of discourse to build knowledge.

2.1 Learning, discourse and social practices

In her study of classroom discourse, Courtney Cazden emphasizes the importance of studying classroom discourse in order to better understand how it enacts the relationship between the “the cognitive and the social” as “the basic purpose of school is served through communication” (p. 2). Because of “the importance of language in the goals of schools,” it is important to analyze or “make transparent” the “medium of classroom discourse” (p. 4). She notes that as conceptions of knowledge and learning have moved from a transmission to a constructivist model, analysis of classroom discourse can pinpoint discourse patterns that facilitate “processes and strategies for learning and doing” (p. 5). Her definition of “discourse,” therefore, can be interpreted as the linguistic patterns or types of language commonly used in classroom situations.

Contemporary educational theories and practices have moved from a transmission model of learning to a view of learning as a socially constructed process in which language plays a fundamental role. Vygotsky viewed language as a semiotic mediator between individuals and the world around them, proposing that cognition are first experienced on the “inter-mental plane” before they are internalized to the “intra-mental
plane." In other words, our private mental reflections arise from experiences that have first been internalized through social interaction. In Vygotsky’s view, therefore, language mediates between individual consciousness and the external world as the individual interacts with others and with the environment, internalizing concepts as linguistic mental representations. Learning, therefore, occurs through interaction with others; therefore, it is not surprising that the role of dialogue is a central concern to many educators and educational researchers.

In order to understand the ways in which concepts are internalized and mentally represented, we need to understand the ways in which this process is mediated through "semiotic devices," including language, and to understand how this process is further mediated through "communicative practices" so that "human communicative practices give rise to mental functioning in the individual" (Wertsch, 1991, pp 12-13, cited in Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995, p. 12).

Vygotsky envisioned learning as mediated through interaction with more experienced learners, whether fellow students or teachers in which a learner moved from his or her "base level of achievement" to a higher level of achievement, terming the difference between a learner's achievement without interaction and the potential achievement that could be made through interaction the "zone of proximal development":

The ZPD is defined as the zone between what a child can do unaideed and the upper limit of 'potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (1978, p. 86).

Gordon Wells (1995), who has written extensively on the relationship between dialogue, talk and text, emphasizes the importance of dialogue in the learning process: "Following Vygotsky, I argue that the preeminent "tool" used to mediate achievement of goals ... is linguistic discourse" (p. 233)

Drawing upon Vygotsky’s framework, Wells continues: “through interaction with others and with the environment,” “the relevant patterns of discourse are gradually internalized and transformed to become the medium of some inner dialogue of thought, and when re-externalized for the more formal spoken and written modes of communication (p. 233), reiterating that “the goals of education ... are not achieved by one-way transmission of knowledge ... but through a dialogue between teacher and learner that has as its aims co-construction of meaning, in relation to tasks and topics that are of mutual concern" (pp 234-235).
The notion of discourse is therefore fundamental in this view of learning as achieved through dialogue, and, according to James Paul Gee and Judith L. Green, "the study of discourse has become an important theoretical perspective for those concerned with the study of learning in social settings" as it enables researchers to better understand "ways in which knowledge is socially constructed in classrooms" and "how knowledge constructed in classrooms ... shapes, and is shaped by, the discursive activity and social practices of members" (1998, p. 119). Analysis of discourse reveals the "patterns of practice" through which members of a community participate, and ways in which talk and action constitute social activity. Gee and Green point out that "language always takes on a specific meaning from the actual context in which it is used, while, simultaneously, helping to construct what we take that context to mean in the first place" (1998, p. 127).

Before undertaking any analysis of the complex interrelationship between social practices, texts, and discourse, it is worthwhile to look at the ways in which these terms have been defined in relation to one another by researchers and theorists who are interested in discourse and textual analysis in social research. Norman Fairclough, who is particularly interested in discourse related to the political economy of new capitalism, defines language as capable of defining "a certain potential, certain possibilities" from the linguistic system while at the same time excluding others; in other words, "certain ways of combining linguistic elements are possible, others are not" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 24). This process is not simply a matter of choosing between linguistic forms; rather, it is socially mediated as "certain possibilities" are selected and used in particular social contexts and for particular functions. For example, within the classroom context, "classroom teaching articulates together particular ways of using language (on the part of both teachers and learners) with the social relations of the classroom, the structuring and use of the classroom as a physical space, and so forth" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 25).

Fairclough's definition of social practice is a very broad one; for instance, he gives an example of "the social practice of classroom teaching in contemporary British education" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 25), but, in my view, such broad practices encompass specific and situated practices which are realized in particular situations and for particular purposes and enacted through discourse.

Certainly, the social practices, with their attendant texts, values, beliefs, and ways of doing things in a science classroom will differ radically from those in an English classroom, but different English classrooms will also differ as the teaching approaches favoured by the instructor intersect with the interests and participation styles of individual students, the selection of texts studied, assignments, grading requirements
and expectations. Social practices evolve in specific settings and in for specific purposes. A certain set of practices may be associated with a particular framework; for example, "academic writing," yet instructors who teach academic writing may employ different teaching practices in their classrooms and encourage their students to engage in the practices the instructor believes are most efficacious. For example, many writing instructors encourage students to write journals, but this practice is less common in classes on essay writing where instructors often feel that it is "extra work" and will not serve a relevant purpose. Similarly, instructors who do include journal writing in their classes vary in the length and format of journal entries, the type of content that should be included, and in teacher response.

The notion of social practice, therefore, is a complex one, encompassing both the specific social practices (discussion groups, on-line posts, debates, etc.) employed in a particular context and the ways in which teachers and students use language to as they participate in these social practices in a particular learning environment. Specific social practices evolve in different classrooms as students and teachers interact over time, and these practices are also situated within a wider context (school, educational system, cultural context) which influences the choices available to students and teachers in particular settings. Social practices, therefore, are both global and situated within a specific context, and any analysis of social practices needs to take both the global factors and the specific factors which influence them into account. Broad generalizations cannot be made about the implications of research that identifies situated practices.

In her introduction to discourse analysis, Stephanie Taylor begins by defining language as "a vehicle for meaning." This implies that its purpose is to produce and convey meanings, and that language is, above all, an instrument, one of many semiotic tools which convey meaning within the context of a group or culture. Clothing, jewelry, gestures, our choice of words which we use all convey powerful meanings. We signal our affiliation or distance from a particular group or culture, and through their use, we internalize the group or culture's definitions of appropriate ways of doing things and perceiving the world. Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1993) observe that all actions and reactions we make as we interact with one another are linguistic processes involving semiotic systems which range from gesture, utterances, proxemics, and the use of space to the semiotic systems in our environment (buildings, roads, signs, etc.).

As Taylor points out, language is not neutral. Rather, it is constitutive: through language we create, convey, and change meanings within the context of a situation, and this process is a dynamic one, as language use is situated within the "process of an
ongoing interaction" (p. 7). We cannot separate an utterance from its response. Taken out of context, it loses its capacity to convey its original—situated—meaning.

The term “discourse” recurs time and again in academic literature, yet concrete definitions are not easy to find. We can begin with a general concept of discourse as “a certain type of talk” which is used in and characteristic of specific social situations or social contexts. This broad definition encompasses the choice of words which may be used, the ways in which people are addressed and position themselves in relation to one another, the type of grammatical constructions and linguistic structures which are commonly used, the appropriate non-verbal aspects of communication in that situation, etc. In other words, discourse includes the relationship between the speakers, who may speak, what may be said, and how it may be said (both verbally or non-verbally). While a specific text may be representative example of a certain discourse, the discourse itself is a resource from which participants draw as they interact with one another.

2.2 Discourse, texts, and social practices

Jay Lemke points out that the term “discourse” is a “rather protean concept” which can be used to “refer to a general phenomenon, the fact that we communicate with language and other symbolic systems, or to particular kinds of things we say (e.g. the discourse of love, or the discourse of political science) (Lemke, 1995, p. 6). Lemke uses the term social semiotics as a “reminder that all meanings are made within communities and that the analysis of meaning should not be separated from the social, historical, cultural and political dimensions of these communities” (Lemke, 1995, p. 9). This term reminds us that any discourse is primarily a vehicle for making meaning, and that this is a socially situated enterprise. Meaning-making, therefore, is above all, a “social practice in a community, and its occurrence is part of what binds the community together and helps to constitute it as a community.” At the same time, a community can be seen, “not as a system of interacting individuals, but as a system of interdependent social practices: a system of doings, rather than a system of doers” (Lemke, 1995, p. 9).

Lemke’s view is of interest to us, as this study is concerned with the social practices in a particular community of learners; however, it is not the “system of doings” which is our primary focus in this study. We are concerned with how the individuals are socialized into and adopt the social practices of this community and the diverse ways in which they position and identify themselves as individuals in relation to these social practices.

Discourse is socially situated, and social context governs the “what, when, and who” can speak in that particular context. For example, we recognize classroom discourse as different from the discourse used at the family dinner table, although, as
researchers such as Eleanor Ochs (1992) and Shirley Brice Heath (1998) have pointed out, the discourses employed in seemingly everyday situations socialize children in particular ways of speaking and prepare them for participation in classroom discourse. Specific discourses have been closely examined by researchers in order to understand the social practices in which they are used, the prescribed ways in participants in a particular social situation or social context interact with one another and the purposes of the discourse they employ (making a transaction in a store, telling a story to a group of children, persuading a jury). Social practices may be broadly defined as socially sanctioned or appropriate ways of doing things in particular social contexts or situations. Transactions in grocery stores, expensive boutiques, and on playgrounds are performed as social practices in which the participants know who can speak, what can be said, and how it can be said in that particular situation.

John Paul Gee frames texts, discourse, and social practices in terms of literacy, or the ability to read something with understanding:

A text of a certain type is read in a certain way and requires different background knowledge and skills to be read with understanding. . . . The ability to read in a certain way is embedded in (apprenticed as a member of) a social practice "wherein people not only read texts of this type in this way but also talk about such texts in certain ways, hold certain attitudes and values about them, and socially interact over them in certain ways" (1996, pp. 2-3).

Gee emphasizes that "texts are parts of lived, talked, enacted, value-and-belief-laden practices carried out in specific places and at specific times" (p. 3). Texts cannot be separated from the "living social practices" in which "they are acquired and in which they are always embedded" (p. 3). Distinguishing between "discourse" as "a stretch of spoken or written language" or "language in use" (p. 3) and "a related set of social practices" which "constitute a Discourse," which encompasses "ways of talking, listening, reading, writing, acting, interacting, believing, valuing and using tools and objects, in particular settings and at specific times, so as to display or to recognize a particular social identity" (p. 10). For example, the related social practices involved in law school constitute the Discourse of the law, and

Law school teachers and students enact specific social identities or 'social positions' in the Discourse of law school. The Discourse creates social positions (or perspectives) from which people are 'invited' ('summoned') to speak, listen, act, read and write, think, feel, believe and value in certain characteristic, historically recognizable ways (p. 10).

Like Fairclough, Gee is primarily interested in the ways in which particular Discourses operate in producing "new kinds of learners, students, citizens, leaders, and workers" which are "being created as we speak by the new capitalism" (p. 11)
2.3 Social practices, education, and academic genre

A great deal of research has been done on social practices in the context of education. Researchers are interested in how certain types of discourse or "discursive activity," as Gee and Green term it, and the "patterns of practice" in which they are used "simultaneously support and constrain" students' access to academic content (p. 119). Gee and Green frame discourse as a process, and contend that through an understanding of discourse processes, we can divine the ways in which discourse and discourse practices "shape what counts as knowing" (p. 120).

Mary Schleppegrell's research on the linguistic features of the language of schooling analyzes the register (both oral and written) of language used in classrooms. Drawing her definition from a Hallidayan functional linguistic model, Schleppegrell identifies a register as "the constellation of lexical and grammatical features that characterizes particular uses of language (Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Martin, 1992, cited in Schleppegrell, 2001, p. 431-432). Registers vary because "what we do with language varies from context to context" and "the choice of different lexical and grammatical options is related to the functional purposes" of language used in context. Texts (whether oral or written) produced "for different purposes in different contexts have different features. For any particular text type, these features can be described in terms of the lexical and grammatical features and the organizational structure found in that text type" (Schleppegrell, 2001, p. 432). These features are the textual realizations of the particular context in which the language is used.

2.4 Text types and genres

All contexts, from business offices to kindergarten classrooms to hospitals, have particular text types associated with them which reflect the context in which they are produced and used. This study is particularly concerned with the text types characteristic of academic contexts, text types which are "instantiated through grammatical features that are common to school-based uses of language and reflect the purposes for which language is typically used in schooling." These "text types" are often termed genres, and each genre "has its own register features" (p. 432) depending on the context in which it is used. It should be noted that the notion of genre is used to talk about general text types (newspaper articles, poems, academic essays) which have certain features, but is also used to distinguish between text types that are found in a similar context and are used for a similar purpose (e.g. an argumentative academic essay vs a process essay). Genres also differ between disciplines. The conventions governing published articles in the humanities, social sciences, and physical and...
biological sciences vary greatly, yet all are encompassed by the global term "academic genre."

As this study is primarily concerned with academic genre, we should also note that the term "academic genre" is also used to encompass all the features of writing found in formal academic settings, from student essays to published articles in journals. A great deal of recent research has been done to compare the similarities and differences between texts produced by professional academic and graduate students in different disciplines, and by students and professional academics in the same discipline in order to identify specific features of academic texts which can be taught to undergraduate students.

The framework of "genre" broadens the notion of "text type" to include the social purposes for which language may be used in particular social or cultural contexts. The notion of genre is useful for analysis, therefore, because it enables us to identify how a text is structured to achieve its purpose and specific language features or textual elements which can be used to convey the kind of information or content appropriate to the genre to members of the community which produces and employs the genre. Genre knowledge is therefore intrinsic to the "conceptual tool kit of professional academics" whose texts must display the "tools of their trade," whether the social scientist's ability to statistically analyze results and demonstrate their relevance, the historian’s ability to synthesize information from archives, or the scientist’s ability to interpret pictures taken with an electron microscope. Professional academics draw upon genre knowledge to demonstrate their familiarity with the research and theoretical frameworks in their field, and "create an appropriate rhetorical and conceptual context" in which to situate their research methodology and knowledge claims (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995, p. 13.

Schleppegrell's research identifies ways in which even the most seemingly innocuous tasks such as "sharing time" in kindergarten and elementary schools ask children to "adopt a stance that presents them as experts who can provide information that is structured in conventional ways" (p. 433) so that "researchers, teachers, and students have more specific knowledge about what is valued in school-based texts" (p. 435).

Identifying "conventionalized patterns of discourse that are created by speakers/writers in response to the different contexts in which they find themselves" identifies, in turn, the ways in which linguistic and grammatical choices "evoke for the participants certain social meanings that the language itself helps instantiate." Analysis of the discourse used in specific contexts, therefore, enables us to understand how registers
operate to convey and inculcate particular "social meanings" (p. 436), a process which occurs continually without our conscious awareness.

Analysis of academic discourse serves a similar purpose while at the same time it enables us to better understand how knowledge is constructed and validated from a disciplinary rather than a classroom perspective. The discourse(s) of academic writing have also attracted increasing attention as "disciplinary discourse is considered to be a rich source of information about the social practices of academics" and "give expression to the meanings and values" of academic disciplines and institutions, thereby revealing "how knowledge is constructed, negotiated and made persuasive" (Hyland, 2000, p. 2-3).

Academic texts do not simply reflect the current interests and arguments of academics within various disciplines but instantiate the ways in which researchers and theorists view the world and construct knowledge: what problems are most relevant to them; how problems are framed; and how current research can be situated in relation to previous research, theoretical frameworks, and relevant authorities. Writing, whether it is research proposals, grant applications, scholarly articles, textbooks, books, book reviews, reference letters, conference papers, peer reviews, or research notes, emails, evaluations, handouts, or study guides (handouts or internet-based), is the most important work academics do. However, a research proposal and the scholarly article based on the research will take a much different form, just as a discussion of the research in an informal email looks very different from the way it is presented in a textbook meant for an undergraduate course. Academic disciplines are defined both by content and by the way in which they choose to convey it:

... it is how they write rather than simply what they write that makes the crucial difference ... Among the things we see are different appeals to background knowledge, different means of establishing truth, and different ways of engaging with readers. Scholarly discourse is not uniform and monolithic, differentiated merely by specialist topics and vocabularies. It is an outcome of a multitude of practices and strategies, where what counts as convincing argument and appropriate tone is carefully managed for a particular audience. These differences are a product then of institutional and interactional forces, the result of diverse social practices of writers within their fields (Hyland, 2000, p. 3).

Discourse, then, can be understood in terms of the interactions possible in a specific social situation and/or social space. Specific discourses have been closely examined by researchers in order to understand the social practices which govern who can speak, what can be said and how it can be said in that particular context, from a specific classroom setting to an academic discipline to the conventions governing the academic register. Analysis of discourse, whether locally situated, a comparison across academic disciplines, or between student texts and published articles, enables us to
identify how discourse and social practices “shape what counts as knowing” (Gee & Green, p. 120).

Analysis of academic genre has been useful in identifying features of academic texts in particular disciplines to help students (both native speakers and second language speakers) whose writing practices are often “marginalized” by the academy if they do not conform to standard forms (Hyland 2000; Swales, 1990; Lea & Street, 1998). By “making students aware of how literacy practices are grounded in social structures” and helping students “unpack the requirements of their disciplines,” (Hyland 2000, p. 147), the insights gained from this analysis enables students to improve their ability to write in ways acceptable to academics in their field.

Language, text, and social context are therefore inextricably related: “the grammatical choices” typical of social contexts “reflect and constitute” those contexts, while, in turn, “the grammatical choices, in turn, evoke for participants certain social meanings that the language itself helps instantiate” (Schleppegrell, 2001, p. 436). Texts, whether they take linguistic, visual, or any other form, are an integral part of this process. Texts are produced and interpreted as part of social practices, as they “simultaneously represent aspects of the world . . . enact social relations between participants and the attitudes, desires, and values of participants . . . connect parts of texts together, and connect texts with their situational contexts” (Halliday, 1978, 1994 cited in Fairclough, 2003, p. 27). Fairclough distinguishes between three textual meanings (action, representation, and identification) while Halliday frames texts in terms of their functions (ideational, interpersonal, and textual), but both view producing and interpreting texts as part of the “process of meaning-making in social events” Fairclough, 2003, p. 25).

2.5 Discourse communities and academia

Researchers interested in academic discourse often use the framework of “discourse community” to describe academic disciplines in (Swales, 1990; Bazerman, 1994; Woodward-Kron, 2004). This framework “foregrounds the linguistic and textual dimensions of disciplinary knowledge,” encompassing shared uses of language, knowledge domain, and frameworks used to interpret experience and construct what counts as research. The term “discourse community” is often used to describe communities in which certain discourses are used between members, socializing them into shared values, norms, and conventions. Within the discourse community, the discourse constitutes and reifies social reality, as members construct and reconstruct their understanding of the world. Such communities, therefore, are knowledge-making
communities as “discourse, communicative conventions, and social interactional patterns” shared by members “reflect and sustain their shared orientations to knowledge” (Canagarajah, 2002, p. 163).

Shared discourse is the central focus of any discourse community, and its “participatory mechanisms” are primarily literacy practices of some kind (Swales, 1990, p. 24-27; Ivanic, 1998, p. 79) primarily thorough written discourse characterized by norms and conventions shared by the community members. In academic discourse communities, such practices may range from writing, reviewing, or peer reviewing journal articles to writing, providing tutoring and revision or marking and annotating student essays. The members of professional academic communities and students are primarily affiliated with other professionals, but they also share a common affiliation through the broader academic discourse communities as they read each other’s texts and share common norms and conventions.

Studies of academic genre include analysis of the linguistic resources used by professional academic writers to “negotiate with prior texts and persuade the community to accommodate new and possibly conflicting claims” (Woodward-Kron, 2004, section 2.1 para 1). Comparative studies have also been undertaken in order to identify the differences between student writing and writing found in scholarly academic journals in order to identify discourse markers which reflect enculturation into the discourse community (Hyland, 2000; Candlin and Plum, 1999; Woodward-Kron, 2004) and to better understand the ways in which specific discourse communities construct knowledge.

As Roz Ivanic points out, “little mention is made of the spoken discourse in academic discourse communities” or of “the interplay between spoken and written” (Ivanic, 1998, p. 80). It is important to note that discourse practices in academic communities are both spoken and written. Ivanic is interested this distinction with regard to cultural differences in academic discourse communities and their practices, but I would add that the increasing use of electronic media, whether email communication, the large number of online journals with varying formats, increased reliance on the internet for research, or the inclusion of bulletin boards and other online forms of learning have also created new discourse practices and blurred the line between formal academic written register and a the more informal spoken register characteristic of many online documents and online communication in academic texts.

2.6 Discourse and social practices in the context of this study

My analysis begins with the general practices that characterized the particular group of students in the particular course studied and attempts to relate those to the
characteristic discourse used in this specific context in order to understand how students engaged with one another and with the texts they studied. As one aspect of this study is a detailed analysis of the grammatical features of the language used by the instructors in the on-line materials developed for the website and the on-line student posts, it is also important to distinguish between the grammatical structures and the discourse functions they may perform in this particular situational context.

Grammatical function and discourse function are different yet related. As Suzanne Eggins and Diana Slade (1997) point out, "the grammatical form 'interrogative' and the discourse function 'question'" are obviously related as are "the grammatical form 'imperative' and the discourse function 'command'" (p. 178-179). However, similar forms may serve different purposes depending on the discourse context, just as different forms may serve similar purposes, and we need to view dialogue in two ways:

From the point of view of grammar . . . and from the point of view of discourse . . .
The first tells us primarily about the linguistic rights and privileges of social roles . . .
the second tells us primarily how, while enacting those social roles, participants are constantly negotiating relationships of solidarity and intimacy (p. 179)

2.7 Learning, participation, and social practices

My analysis of the relationship between texts, social practices, and discourse also draws upon the work of Lave and Wenger (1994) and Wenger (1998). In his book “Communities of Practice,” Etienne Wenger (1998) proposes a social theory of learning which develops the theory of “legitimate peripheral participation” first put forward in Lave and Wenger’s (1994) “Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation.”

Distinguishing between “learning” and “intentional instruction” (Lave and Wenger, 1994, p. 40), Lave and Wenger examined ethnographic studies of apprenticeship to see what “might contribute to a general theory of learning” (Wenger, 1998, p. 11). They broadened the notion of apprenticeship from the traditional one of master/trainee to a notion of “changing participation and identity transformation in a community of practice,” theorizing that it is through membership in a community and active participation in its social practices or communal enterprises that learners gradually acquire the skills and concepts they need in order to participate fully in that community. Learning is conceptualized as a trajectory of increasing participation in a community of practice rather than as the mastery of a set curriculum, and learners as move from “peripheral” or partial participation to full participation in the community, they acquire competency.

Wenger (1998) built on his and Lave’s previous work by carefully defining theoretical constructs such as “practice,” “meaning,” “community,” “learning,” “identity,” and “participation” in relation to a social theory of learning. He proposed a model of
learning as an apprenticeship through mutual engagement in joint enterprises in a
"community of practice." As Wenger expressed it, "knowing is a matter of participating.
... of active engagement in the world" and therefore "meaning - the ability to experience
the world and our engagement with it as meaningful - is ultimately what learning is to
produce" (p. 4).

Wenger's notion of social practice, which he defines as "the production and
reproduction of specific ways of engaging with the world," resonates with the repeated
way in which participants in this study framed learning: "engaging with the text"; or
"engaging with other students."

Wenger emphasizes that "the concept of practice highlights the social and
negotiated character of both the explicit [things we are explicitly taught] and the tacit
[values, assumptions, and beliefs which shape practices] in our lives" (p. 47). Practices
may be repeated, yet they are not static: every time we participate in a practice we have
participated in before, whether it is writing an argumentative essay or going to lunch with
colleagues, "we produce again a new situation, an impression, an experience: we
produce meanings that extend, redirect, dismiss, reinterpret, modify or confirm—in a
word, negotiate anew—the histories of meanings of which they are a part" (p. 52-53).
As Wenger envisions it, negotiation of meaning "is the process through which we
experience the world and our engagement in it as meaningful"; therefore, "human
engagement in the world is first and foremost a process of negotiating meaning (p. 53).

Our engagement in the world and the ways in which we negotiate meaning are
constituted by language within the "process of an ongoing interaction" (Taylor, 2001, p.
7). 'We are in constant dialogue with ourselves and with others, a dialogue which
involves both interpretation and action. As Wenger envisions it:

... this perspective does not imply a fundamental distinction between interpreting
and acting, doing and thinking, or understanding and responding. All are part of the
ongoing process of negotiating meaning ... meaning exists in this process of
negotiation (p. 54)

Whether "in a playground clique or a work team," our "participation shapes not only
what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do" (p. 4), and
participation in social practices which "encompass shared historical and social resources,
frameworks, and perspectives" and foster "mutual engagement in action" or "sustained
pursuit of a shared enterprise" (p. 45) results in the creation of a community. A
community may be "a group of office workers engaged in the same task who learn from
one another and create a collective approach" or "a group of students engaged in
learning tasks who develop shared practices" (p. ) in which meaning is constantly
negotiated.
Wenger observes that "teachers talk about students gaining ownership of the material, and by this they refer to their achieving not only perfunctory mastery but personal meaning as well." Construction and negotiating of meaning, therefore, is bound up with identity. Through participation, engagement, construction of personal meaning and negotiation of meanings through interpretation and action, meanings “become part of who we are” (p. 201):

Therefore, to know in practice is to have a certain identity so that information gains the coherence of a form of participation. (p. 220).

Although Wenger’s study was done in the context of a large corporation rather than in a formal educational setting and he makes little reference learning and knowledge in academic contexts, he does mention the potential of online environments to facilitate the development of new kinds of learning communities:

In making information more widely available, what the technological advances of a so-called information society really do is to create wider, more complex, and more diversified economies of meaning and communities . . . with respect to the potential for learning communities, issues of identification and negotiability are then heightened and transcended (p. 220-1)

Wenger’s view of learning revolves around the notion of engagement, and therefore is explored in greater detail in relation to the notion of engagement as framed by participants in this study. Issues of identity are central to this framework, as we internalize negotiated and constructed meanings so that they become part of who we are.

In her study of the experience of mature students, identity, and academic writing, Roz Ivanic (1998) focused on issues of identity in relation to the act of writing. In her view, there are “three ways of thinking about the identity of a person in the act of writing” (Ivanic, 1998, p. 24). She distinguishes between the ‘autobiographical self,’ or a writer’s personal, subjective sense of identity informed both by the events in which the writer has experienced and by how the writer has represented them to him or herself; the ‘discoursal self,’ or the ‘self as author,’ ‘the self constructed through the discourse characteristics of a text and conveyed through writing; and the ‘self as author,’ or the writer’s position, opinions, and beliefs (Ivanic, 1998, pp. 24-26). This self is concerned with establishing an authorial ‘voice’ or an authoritative stance the writer establishes. This aspect of the self is particularly significant in relation to academic writing, as “writers differ considerably in how far they claim authority as the source of the content” and “how far they establish an authorial presence in their writing” (Ivanic, 1998, p. 26). The authorial self is particularly problematic for newcomers to an academic discipline, in
which they must negotiate between their personal opinions, beliefs, and values and those of the established experts in their field. Therefore, the authorial self in any form of academic writing tells us the kind of “authority that the student feels she can lay claim to” (Lea, 1999, p. 108).

In my analysis of the evolving social practices in this on-line community, I drew upon Lave and Wenger's (1994) concept of “legitimate peripheral participation” and Wenger's (1998) model of learning as an apprenticeship through mutual engagement in joint enterprises in a “community of practice.” Lave and Wenger clearly distinguish between “learning” and “intentional instruction” (Lave and Wenger, 1994, p. 40). Their model is not based on a transmission model of learning but on a view of learning as a social activity. Through membership in a community and active participation in its social practices or communal enterprises, learners gradually acquire the skills and concepts they need in order to participate fully, moving from “peripheral” or partial participation to full participation in the community. Learning is conceptualized as a trajectory of increasing participation in a community of practice rather than as the mastery of a set curriculum. Lave and Wenger's view is reiterated by Prior's argument that “knowledge construction and communication are achieved by engagement, participation, and performance, not by detached learning of abstract rules” (cited in Paltridge, 2004, p. 87).

I also drew on Ivanic's framework, one in which writers negotiate between diverse and often conflicting positions as they appropriate academic discourse and attempt to integrate disciplinary knowledge and formats into the discourses which comprise their autobiographical selves through the act of writing.

The community presented here can be characterized as an academic discourse community whose practices revolve around reading and writing academic prose texts. Through mutual engagement in online discussion of model texts, participation in face-to-face discussion, and writing essays and exams, the students are being apprenticed into the practice of writing argumentative academic essays. This practice encompasses many specific practices, including identifying key terms, stating an argument, incorporating textual evidence to support an argument, and clearly warranting the evidence, as well as knowledge of formal essay structure, acknowledging and incorporating sources, academic citation, etc. Although didactic materials and models are presented on the course website, these are structured to engage students rather than present abstract concepts, and the most important learning activity is composing and answering online postings.

As the majority of students in this course were in their first or second year of formal university education, they were “novices” in terms of participating in this academic
discourse community, where many encountered new and sometimes unfamiliar literacy practices and ways of knowing and confronted new ideas, an unfamiliar academic discipline, and diverse and often conflicting views. This was confirmed in the student interviews, where many students, who had been good students in high school, expressed their frustration at the difficulties they had experienced in understanding and meeting the expectations of their university professors. Entering a university or college requires adjustment to a new environment, new ways of thinking, and different expectations:

Learning in higher education involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting and organising knowledge. Academic literary practices—reading and writing within disciplines—constitute central processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study. (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 158)

Students in this course acquire the knowledge of and ability to use argumentative rhetorical strategies by participating in argumentative discourse through on-line interaction. They are guided through the process by the website, which provides models for ways to approach the model texts as well as through face-to-face discussion. On-line interaction is structured to provide students with opportunities to use the rhetorical strategies in different forms of argumentative discourse exemplified in the texts. The website itself does not present argumentative strategies as a set of "abstract rules," but presents the information as interactively as possible in order engage the students and actively involve them in learning. Through guided analysis of the material on the website, participation in face-to-face discussion and actively contributing to on-line discussions, students are engaged in what Lave and Wenger term "legitimate peripheral participation," modified forms of participation though which members of a community are initiated into its practices. The peripheral position occupied by learners who are not yet able to fully participate in the practices of the community "provides an approximation of full participation and gives exposure to actual practice" (Wenger, 1998, p. 100), just as participation in on-line discussion and debate prepares students for writing argumentative essays and examination questions:

Learning [. . .] implies becoming able to be involved in new activities, to perform new tasks and functions, to master new understandings. Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning. These systems of relations arise out of and are reproduced and developed within social communities (Lave and Wenger, 1994, p. 53).

The course can be viewed as a community of practice with its own social practices meant to facilitate the ability to understand and employ a variety of strategies used in
writing argumentative texts. Through writing on-line posts, learners improve their ability to effectively argue a position and use textual evidence to support a claim. Participation takes the form of socialization into a particular discourse. As Lave and Wenger put it, "issues of language . . . may well have more to do with legitimacy of participation and with access to peripherally," i.e. with discourse socialization, "than they do with knowledge transmission" (Lave and Wenger, 1994, p. 105). In order to actively participate in a community and be recognized by its members, learners need to acquire the discourse used by its members. Using language is therefore crucial to participation; therefore, a close analysis of discourse employed by members of a community of practice enables us to better understand what constitutes knowledge and how learning is facilitated in the context of a particular community.

Through participation in this on-line community, learners acquire the discourse and strategies required to participate in the broader community of academic writers. Students are enculturated into academic discourse, and, in particular the ability to write in the academic genre of argumentation. The social practices that members of the community participate in and the ways in which they use discourse can be identified in order to examine the "processes through which writers and speakers acquire genre knowledge and what it is that people learn in this process that is needed for the successful performance of the genre" (Paltridge, 2004, p. 87). The course can be seen as an example of genre-based pedagogy in which students are engaged in an interactive learning cycle in which they acquire knowledge and understanding of the target genre (argumentative essays) and how to apply to their own individual texts. Analysis of the discourse revealed that students drew upon and negotiated between a variety of discourses and interpretive frameworks during the act of writing, integrating their autobiographical, authorial and discoursal selves in the act of writing.

2.8 Analyzing Argument

2.8.1 Toulmin’s structure of argument

As the focus of this course was on the study of argumentative writing and the purpose was to develop students’ ability to engage in argumentation and employ the argumentative strategies they had studied in their own writing, I will begin with a brief analysis of argumentation. The classic work on the structure of argument is Toulmin’s (1958) “The Uses of Argument.” Toulmin’s analysis divides argument into three interconnected elements:

Let it be supposed that we make an assertion, and commit ourselves thereby to the claim which any assertion necessarily involves. If this claim is challenged, we must be able to establish it—that is, make it good, and show that it was justifiable . . . we
shall normally have some facts to which we can point in its support: if the claim is challenged, it is up to us to appeal to these facts, and present them as the foundation upon which our claim is based (p. 97)

Toulmin clearly distinguishes between the “claim or conclusion whose merits we are seeking to establish” and “the facts we appeal to as a foundation for the claim—what I shall refer to as our data” (p 97). In addition to “data” or the facts which support a claim, a further element is needed for any convincing argument: in order to “show that, taking these data as a starting point, the step to the original claim is an appropriate and legitimate one,” we need to include what Toulmin terms “warrants” in order to show that the claim and data are logically connected. According to Toulmin, warrants are:

- general, hypothetical statements, which can act as bridges, and authorise the sort of step to which our particular argument commits us . . . Propositions of this kind I shall call warrants to distinguish them from both conclusion and data (p. 98)

Warrants function to legitimate the claim being made on the basis of the data as a warrant “explicitly” registers “the legitimacy of the step involved” and “refer[s] it back to a larger class of steps whose legitimacy is being presupposed” (p. 100).

Toulmin was concerned with philosophical argument rather than with literary texts or rhetorical strategies, but concept of argument is one which identifies the common elements in a mathematical, philosophical, or jurisprudent argument have in common and shows how these elements are related. This notion of a valid argument as one which supported by evidence which can be “legitimated” by a warrant, or an explicit logical connection to the argument, is a framework used in different academic disciplines. Although the terminology may differ, the same concept is found in arguments made about literary texts and is fundamental to the social practices common to literature classrooms where students learn to make claims about a literary text and support them with clearly warranted textual evidence. Similarly, the students in this study demonstrated that they were able to “engage” with texts they read by using relevant textual evidence to support their claims.

### 2.8.2 Argumentation and literary texts

In an ethnographic study of a high school English literature classroom, Margaret Early (2003) identified specific social practices in a related to Toulmin’s argument structure. The first of the “dominant social practices the students were being socialized into in this classroom” was “that of making a case” (para 5).

In the face-to-face discussion, the instructor used questions very carefully to guide the students into formulating arguments. A question like “So, first impression of
these two characters?" asks the students to formulate a hypothesis. After a hypothesis or claim has been advanced, the instructor then invites the students to "support" the "claim" by a question such as "What makes you say that?" As Early observed, it is through the social practice of guided question and answers and the careful patterning of responses to follow the sequence "claim," "evidence," and "link, that the students are apprenticed into knowing what it means to make case when discussing literature, i.e. to form a hypothesis that related a claim to a piece of textual evidence and to begin to link these various pieces to the overall thesis statement.

This pattern (claim, textual evidence, link) "was practiced repeatedly in classroom discussions" (para 5). When making claims or arguments about literary texts, the "data" which "legitimates" the claim is "textual evidence" or a specific citation from the text which must be demonstrably relevant. Close attention to literary discourse is therefore paramount. Students need to be able to read between the lines of a text, make connections between different parts of the text, to understand ways in which language can be used to convey content, to make intertextual meanings, and open up a text to different readings through the use of words which recall other words, evoke physical sensations, create auditory or visual effects, etc.

No thesis can be warranted without an aggregate of relevant textual evidence achieved through a close reading of the text. Through close analysis of the linguistic form of a text, hypotheses can be advanced about the content. Therefore, close reading and supporting a claim through reference to the text are the most important social practices students learn in a literature classroom as students are "socialized into a literary discourse community" (para 6).

As a literary text is always open to interpretation and re-interpretation, "recourse to textual evidence is not the only social practice" in which instructors and students engage in the study of literature. In the classroom Early observed, the teacher continually issued invitations to the students such as "So... how would you react, like Ralph or Piggy?..." which Early terms a "call for a more personal reading of the text, for the private reading to be made public" (para 8). Such questions also invited alternate readings of the text, and made students aware of the diverse readings which could be constructed. Through such questions, the instructor encouraged students to respond personally to the text, to ground their response in textual evidence, and to pay attention to ways in which the author's particular use of language engendered their subjective response to the text.
The website in this study uses a similar approach. The didactic materials on the website use a variety of questions and interactive strategies to encourage the students to formulate and share their personal responses to the text, while, at the same time, grounding them in “textual evidence.” The materials also focus on the linguistic and rhetorical strategies employed by different authors in order to raise students’ awareness of the relationship between form and content and also of the way in which language can be used to provoke subjective, emotional responses rather than simply convey factual information. Students are encouraged to scrutinize their personal responses to the texts and to move from immediate emotional response to a more analytical perspective.

Early also observed that evidence were not limited to evidence from the text under study but could also be extended to another “source of authority,” such as literary criticism. The students were free to support their claims with evidence from “reader-response criticism, historical criticism” or new criticism,” but “these claims, however, did not go unchallenged,” (para 6). Students were continually required to demonstrate the legitimacy of their evidence and to show that it could be clearly linked to the claim. All claims were considered equally valid yet equally open to interrogation.

In a literature classroom, unlike a mathematics classroom (at the high school level, at least), there is no “one right answer” or one fixed interpretation of a text. Reading and interpretation of a literary text is a process of constant negotiation and renegotiation of meaning. The text is constructed through the process of reading and acquires meaning through the reader’s interpretation and the experience (reading other texts, personal experiences, knowledge from other domains, etc.) the reader brings to his or her interpretation. As Early noted, in the class she observed, the teacher “invited” responses rather than provided authoritative interpretations and reiterated the importance of grounding any response in textual evidence by asking the students to provide textual citations and to clearly demonstrate the connection between the textual evidence and their interpretations or claims.

Both the website materials and the instructors adopted similar approaches in this course. The course coordinator explained that website materials were deliberately constructed so as to avoid “avoid . . . spelling everything out for students.” Instead they were intentionally “interrogative in nature” as possible so that “students are not provided with exhaustive answers.” This is part of a general need to “get away from undergraduate education that proceeds by . . . memorization and the ingestion” and to develop “a kind of first year education . . . in which students have to do something for themselves.” The coordinator felt that this was imperative for real learning to take place:
I think there's a distinction between learning... in which students... are told from the front of the room... what the answers are... and they write down the answers and memorize them... learning type A... on the other hand... learning type B where... no answers provided... or few answers provided... suggestions... about ways in which you might approach a text... and then the students think it through for themselves... that's really fundamental.

The coordinator's views were echoed by the teaching assistants. One TA felt that:

the material on the mixed-mode web page is very generative, and that's intentionally so... and I think that's one of the great successes of the course... because what it does is it gets the group talking about the issues rather than, you know, Herr Professor in front of the room saying you know 'this is what Virginia Woolf is saying... write that down'.

The TAs agreed that, as graduate students in English, they all had their own interpretations of the texts read in the course, and their own perspectives as to what aspects of the text were the most important. Yet they actively refrained from taking an authoritative stance when conducting discussion sections. Even when bringing up points which they considered important, one TA carefully phrased it as “here's my interpretation”... “here's something that I've been thinking about”... in order to avoid the assumption that hers was “the authoritative response” because, as she put it, “I think, of course, there is none.” Whenever she presented her own interpretation of a text, she invited the students to add their own views, whether or not they agreed with her, asking: “does anyone want to critique that... does anyone have anything to add to that?”

Similarly, when a student came to one of the TAs for a fuller explanation of why he lost points on an examination question, the TA chose to direct him back to the reading and to ask questions to help him discover the connection between different parts of the text rather than to provide an authoritative explanation such as “here's where you went wrong” or “you didn't understand what the author was saying.” He explained that...

... I think if I just said, you know, you should read it this way... they might remember that and they might not... but if they can go back... and look at it and see how it's being put together... then they'll always remember that... and they'll actually have a better appreciation for... for how texts can work.

Like the teacher in the classroom Early observed, the instructors in this course felt that their role was to guide the students back to the text rather than impose interpretations on it:

I think that kind of tends to be the role of the instructor... if no one else has already brought it back to the text... to kind of say okay like 'well, where's some... what would Mill say about this?'... 'where's the textual evidence for that?'...
By reiterating the importance of "textual evidence," the instructors are initiating students into the primary social practices in literary classes: supporting a claim using evidence from the text and establishing a clear connection between the claim and the evidence.

The primary objective of course is to engage students in dialogue, a "pedagogical communicative relation" (Burbules, 1993, p. x) through which students are guided to a better understanding of, as the course coordinator phrased it, "how an argument can be . . . constructed. . . how one can argue a case. . . how a piece of prose works. . . how a piece of non-fictional prose works . . . rhetorically." The course content focuses on "the modes of developing arguments," deepening students’ understanding of essay structure through analysis of varied rhetorical strategies used in argumentative essays. Though analysis of the connection between form and content as well as on-line exercises in which students are asked to argue specific points, the students make connections between theory and practice, between rhetorical strategies in the texts they read in the course and rhetorical strategies in the texts they encounter in their everyday lives, connecting the strategies they analyze in other texts to their own writing. As Mike summed it up:

... that's sort of the stated purpose of the first year English program... it's not to turn everybody into English majors... It's to get them to think more critically about--in some cases a lot more critically--about how they're reading... it's not just to read it at face value... but to really think about what's being said and how it's being said... and hopefully to start to apply some of that to their own writing...

2.8.3 Argumentation and academic literacy practices

In her discussion of the origins and assumptions behind our notions of academic literacy, Joan Turner points out that academic thinking, which is "tied up with notions of rationality and logic, assumes the possibility of absolute clarity in the representation of knowledge" (Turner, 1999, p. 151). This assumption stems from its origins in the intellectual traditions, and in particular, an objectivist epistemology which influenced the essay format most closely associated with the academic genre. Common notions of academic literacy are also conflated with a model of literacy which "assumes that the acquisition of literacy enhances cognitive abilities," (p. 152), and develops reasoning abilities and abstract thought (Street, 1984, Egan (1991) Turner suggests that what she terms the "discourse of transparency" continues to influence the ways in which academic essays are read and assessed, reminding us that criteria such as "clarity," "focus," and "explicitness" are often used to evaluate student writing. Lea and Street (1998) found that while instructors looked for "argument" and "structure" as key elements in student
writing, they were often unable to provide specific details to explain what the terms meant in terms of a specific piece of writing. Turner identifies “argument” as a “key concept in the academic literacy practices of the academic essay.” She points out that it refers both to “making a specific point or claim” and also to “the end product of the essay as a whole” and therefore views the essay both in terms of its “rhetorical force” and its overall shape (p. 156).

The essay format is traditionally a linear one in which causes are followed by effects and claims are followed by evidence. The structure of an essay, therefore, should “afford the reader consistency of gaze,” which, as Turner terms it, ‘intermingles’ with “the conceptual construction of rationality and knowledge acquisition”:

The ‘pursuit of truth as it were, is linked with a territorial imperative to clear the ground, stake a claim, and construct a vantage point. As with colonization, of which the discourse of ‘the west and the rest’ is a reflection, so it is with knowledge production. Even in already established ‘fields’ of knowledge, there is an impulsion to ‘push back the frontiers’ and for the practitioners within, to be ‘at the cutting edge.’ This general colonizing mind-set might be seen to stem from the enlightenment mentality where scientific rationality is poised to conquer all (Turner, 1999, pp 156-157).

Returning to issues of evaluation and assessment of student writing, Turner points out that “assessing the individual on the extent to which he/she is in control of the argument in an academic essay may be seen as a genealogical trace of this value system” (p. 157).

In the following chapters, we will look at specific examples of online discourse to identify particular discursive strategies the students used to position themselves and address their readers. In particular we will identify ways in which participation in online discussion helped students to integrate the discourses which comprised their autobiographical selves with academic discourse and facilitated improvement in formal academic writing, expediting the students’ progression from novices to full participants in the academic community.
Chapter 3
Engagement and Interaction: The Case of John Stuart Mill

3.1 Rationale

In order to better understand how students used argumentative strategies as they engaged with the text and with others in on-line discourse, I focused on the on-line interactions regarding Mill’s “On Liberty.” The analysis included identification of the social practices used by members of this on-line community, and, in particular, social practices related to their growing understanding and use of argumentative strategies in their writing. This was followed by an in-depth discourse analysis of the on-line discourse to look at the linguistic strategies students used to position themselves in relation to the text and to each other.

"On Liberty" was selected for several reasons. The first was that, in many ways, it is the focal text in the course, as it exemplifies the most important themes in the course readings. In the introductory session, the course coordinator identified the central theme of the course as the individual in relation to society, explaining that many of the texts explore ways in which individuals negotiate the balance between individual desires and social/political orthodoxy. This was followed by a brief overview of this theme in relation to Orwell’s *Politics and the English Language*, the first course reading. Even at this initial stage, the course coordinator mentioned that similar themes could be identified in a text the students would read later in the term, John Stuart Mill’s “On Liberty.”

"On Liberty" has been included in the course readings for as long as the course has been taught. The instructors and TAs agreed that it is a challenging text because of Mill’s prose style, but felt that students benefit by grappling with Mill’s ideas. The course consultant commented that “On Liberty” is ultimately the text from which the students often “get the most satisfaction”:

... it really really challenges them ... they are not used to that kind of discourse. . . the ideas I think in On Liberty are challenging but they are . . . also . . . in many ways the groundwork of our society . . . like them or not, they really are fundamental to . . to how we structure our world

The TAs involved in the course agreed. Mike noted that “a lot of the texts are dealing with similar issues, and that’s why "On Liberty" is at the center of the course . . . It makes a good sort of centerpiece for the course because a lot of the essays are dealing with a lot of the same sorts of things . . . personal freedom versus social control. . . minority and majority issues.”

"On Liberty" is read about half way through the course, so by the time students come to it, they have already encountered and engaged in discussion of some of the issues central to Mill’s text. By the time they read "On Liberty," the students are
comfortable with posting on-line and have met in face-to-face discussion sections several times, so they know and interact comfortably with one another. The students are also familiar with the course website, and, in particular, with the sections of the website meant to guide them through the reading process, including “Key Terms,” “Pointers for Reading,” and “Go Read the Essay.” By this time, they have been exposed to a variety of different argumentative strategies and are aware that there are many approaches which a writer may employ to present an argument and persuade a reader of its validity. Students are well aware of the importance of including evidence, and, in particular, evidence from the text, to support any argument they make.

“On Liberty” is the only book-length text that the students read in its entirety (they read excerpts from all other longer texts collected in *The Norton Reader*), and two full weeks are devoted to reading and discussion of the text. Online discussion is carefully structured in order to engage the students with the text. In the first week, the students participate in a formal on-line debate on a proposition based on one of the central issues in “On Liberty”; therefore, analysis of the first week’s postings can help us to understand how the students engaged with Mill’s text.

### 3.2 Social practices: Academic genre and argumentation

In reviewing the data, I began by identifying the particular social practices that had evolved on-line as students engaged with the texts. In particular, I looked for ways in which students had begun to adopt the approaches to textual analysis modeled by their instructors and by the instructional materials on the website. I was interested in the ways in which the students engaged with one another in online discussion, incorporated evidentials into their arguments, and conveyed their particular attitude or position in relation to the ideas or information presented. As both interpersonal and textual functions varied greatly depending upon the ideational content of the posts, and, in particular, the types of evidence students used to argue their propositions, I have focused on the grammatical structures used to discuss two different types of evidence.

As Paltridge (2004) observes, when entering a particular discourse community, students need to understand the “general discourse community expectations and conventions for their text” the intended audience for their text” and the “criteria they will use for evaluating and responding” to the students’ writing as well as the “background knowledge values and understandings it is assumed they will share with their audience” (p. 97). This is a complex and challenging task.

This chapter focuses on the ways in which students engaged with the proposition they were asked to argue and how they positioned themselves in relation to the
argument and to Mill. The following chapters discuss the ways in which students incorporated other types of evidence as support for their argument.

3.3 Engagement with the Text

In the first week that the students read "On Liberty", the instructions for posting on the website explained the procedure:

This week we are going to follow Mill's principle of hearing both sides—we are going to have a debate on the following proposition:

Society can be a worse tyrant than Government

If your surname begins with M-Z you are on the AFFIRMATIVE—supporting the proposition.

If your surname begins with A-L you are on the NEGATIVE—opposing the proposition.

Each member of the AFFIRMATIVE team will post an argument in favour of the proposition by Monday February 21st 12 midnight. Each member of the NEGATIVE team will post an argument against the proposition by Tuesday February 22nd 12 midnight. And, as usual, you are encouraged to respond to other people's postings voluntarily as well.

Note that this topic requires a good understanding of material in this week's Mill module, and of at least the first chapter of "On Liberty".

Try to include appropriate quotations from "On Liberty" in your posting, and keep your posting brief; make one persuasive point. Your posting should not exceed 250 words, and it could be quite a bit shorter than that.

The students were arbitrarily divided into pros and cons and specifically instructed to use Mill's text to argue the proposition. Asking the students to adopt a viewpoint that they might not necessarily agree with was a deliberate strategy that, as the course consultant put it, "makes them remove themselves... from the material and think objectively about the material." This strategy was adopted in order to get the students to think more analytically about the material instead of responding emotionally. All the instructors agreed that this was beneficial for the students and helped them develop their ability to argue rationally about issues:

... they still feel sometimes they have to preface by saying 'I don't really believe this' but that's fine... they are thinking... analytically... this is a step towards real analysis... with students so you want to say 'ok force yourself on this... here's an exercise that forces you to do so'

Through participation in this community of instructors and learners, students are apprenticed into writing academic genres, and in particular, the academic genre of the
argumentative essay. Participation entails a variety of social practices in which the students engage with the texts and with other members of the community. Practices include reading the exemplary texts which embody diverse argumentative strategies, reading the material available on the website, and, in particular, the “Pointers for Reading” and “Argumentative Strategies” sections of each module which focus on the rhetorical strategies adopted by different writers, posting on-line responses to questions posed by the instructors (including assigned postings and voluntary posting in response to questions posted in the “Argumentative Strategies” section of the website as well as posting or responding to posts in the “Passing Notes” section). In addition, students attended a weekly face-to-face discussion section, and wrote an in-class essay, a formal essay, and a final examination which consisted of several essay questions. Although reading and guided analysis of the course materials was meant to develop students’ understanding of an ability to write an argumentative essay, it was through participation in on-line discussion that the instructors expected the students to analyze argumentative texts and use argumentative strategies in their own writing as they interacted with one another on-line.

3.4 Features of argumentative writing identified in the on-line posts

Many students made intertextual references to texts they had already read, including Martin Luther King, and Orwell, as well as one reference to Orwell’s 1984, which they had not read, to support their propositions. All the students were aware that they needed to include evidence of some kind to support their claims, although, as we will see in the next chapter, some students did not include evidence to support their argument. The ways in which students used language to introduce the type of evidence used and to warrant its legitimacy will also be analyzed in detail in later sections. Evidentials included specific citations from the text, such as “to paraphrase from Mill,” “as mentioned by Mill,” “in the words of John Stuart Mill,” and “according to Mill,” as well as verbs: Mill “notes,” “points out,” “states,” “concedes,” and “argues.” Here, the lexical choices are drawn from an academic register, most likely to appeal to the course instructors and TAs and to establish an authoritative stance.

Other references were used, including general references such as “people say” or “it is said” which generalize beyond the individual writer’s opinion to a general, non-specific authority of some kind.

Although the instructions on the website did not require this, many students also included a variety of contemporary or historical examples to support their claims in the first Mill module, including Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, the French Revolution, the
invasion of Iraq, and Tiananmen Square, and several of the posts which discussed specific examples included a hyperlink to an on-line resources as evidence to back up their claims. This reference to outside sources is through a link was felt to be an advantage of online posts and evolved as a common practice, as more and more students began to include online links in their posts as the term went on.

Both the website materials and the discussion sections reiterated the importance of using clearly defined terminology. Each module included a "Key Terms’ section which defined and explicated vocabulary which may have been unfamiliar, and the face-to-face discussion sections often focused on how specific writers used and defined terms. This was reflected in an online practice of defining terminology, often with a reference to an online dictionary. In this module, and many students began their post by defining the key terms "tyrant" and "government." Interestingly, although some students incorporated personal definitions of society in their posts, very few dictionary definitions of society, probably the most ambiguous of the terms, were included.

Another practice which evolved in the posts as the course continued and students became familiar with the terminology, instructors’ expectations, and argumentative prose essay genre was adopting a more academic register in the posts, and, in particular, using the terminology of argumentation. Many of the posts in this module used verbs such as "refute," "contend," "argue," and "concede," which are drawn from the language of argumentation, while others used verbs drawn from an academic register, such as "discuss," "point out," and "state."

3.5 Introduction to the Module

In the introduction to the module, "On Liberty" was introduced as "challenging reading" which would require "demanding intellectual work" on the students' part, and the rationale for including this difficult text was clearly explained:

Why Read On Liberty?

Reason 1: It is an important text in English literature, and in Western civilization over the past 150 years.

Reason 2: It is a particularly good example of a carefully worked out argument.

Reason 3: It requires a good deal of intellectual effort to read it, and thus will prepare you for levels of reading that you might expect in University courses during the coming years-and for the kinds of careers that university graduates are likely to pursue.

Reason 4: There is pleasure to be had in working with a challenging text until you are able to read it with critical understanding. Or, to put this in slightly different
terms, serious thinking can be enjoyable, which is what we hope you have been finding in this course all along.

**Reason 5:** Mill's emphasis on free individual inquiry, and on the fruitful encounter between opposing ideas, is a central value in a University.

**Reason 6:** On Liberty raises issues that are very much on our minds today - issues of personal freedom and social control, which we wrestle with in such contexts as abortion, anti-smoking regulations, "hate literature," pornography, etc etc. Mill's book can clarify your thinking about complex and difficult issues such as these.

### 3.6 Online discourse in the debate on Mill

The course instructors identified the sense of writing for an audience as one of the most important aspects of writing on-line posts. As the purpose of argumentative writing is primarily to "persuade readers to accept a particular contention or point of view," (Love, 1999, p. 198), the instructors began by showing students how rhetorical strategies both inform a writer's message and are chosen to appeal to a particular audience. This is the primary focus of essay analysis on the website, and it is this aspect of argumentative writing that all the instructors commented on in interviews, where they framed it in terms of understanding the relationship between form and content or how linguistic form can be manipulated in order to convey or mask a particular content. The "Commentary" and "Argumentative Strategies" section of each module analyzed specific passages from the text in detail and drew the students' attention to the rhetorical strategies used by each author in order to raise their awareness of ways in which linguistic forms could be employed to convey different types of content.

In examining the linguistic strategies used by the students, I have drawn on the framework of Halliday's functional linguistics. Unlike traditional grammatical analysis, which focuses on the way in which information is organized at the sentence level, Halliday's functional grammar focuses on the purposes for which language is used: the linguistic choices available to achieve specific purposes in specific contexts from the sentence level to the level of the text in its entirety (Halliday, 1994; Thompson, 1996; Love, 1999; Derewianka, 1999). Halliday identifies three broad functions realized by language: the ideational function; the interpersonal function; and the textual function. The ideational function is concerned with the use of language to represent experience and ideas, while the interactional function is concerned with the roles we adopt in we interact and engage with others, and the textual function refers to the way in which language operates to organize a text, establishing a coherent relationship between the text, the global context, and the reader (Halliday, 2005; Derewianka, 1999; Thompson, 1996). For Halliday, the "meaning of a text lies in the integration of all three functions,
each of which is understood in relation to the others,” (Hyland, 2005, p. 26), and we need to look at texts holistically rather than limiting ourselves to analysis of one feature or aspect. We cannot focus on one function without considering how it is informed by the others.

Although I feel that Halliday’s framework is an extremely useful way to identify relationships between and functions of specific aspects of discourse, I have not used Halliday’s terminology in my analysis, and, in fact, have tried to use linguistic or grammatical terminology only in conjunction with specific examples in order to ensure that the way I used specific grammatical terms could be clearly understood. Although I have not tried to use Hallidayan analytic frameworks used in analyses of academic writing, my overall approach is framed by Halliday’s emphasis on the function which language serves in a particular context. The overall question that frames all the linguistic analysis included here is: “For what purposes are the participants using language in this particular context?” In looking at the choices these students made, whether in choosing what they wanted to say, how they addressed their readers or acknowledged the reader’s presence in their text, the connections they made between their text and the other discourses and texts from which they drew in their own writing, I asked, “Who can speak?” “What can be said?” and “How can it be said?” in this particular context.

3.7 Instructors’ views

All the instructors agreed that the on-line debate was a worthwhile exercise, one that got students “thinking . . . analytically” and a way to make students argue rationally rather than emotionally about an issue. The term “analysis” was used repeatedly by the instructors in reference to the objectives for the course, whether they were discussing the overall course goals, the aims of a particular on-line exercise, or what they hoped to accomplish during a particular meeting of the discussion section. Examples include “analytical thinking,” “analyze the literature,” “in-depth analysis,” and “analyze key terms.” The first thing I examined, therefore, was the linguistic strategies students employed to appeal to the intellect and give their texts a factual, academic tone. I would like to quickly note that all the examples of student writing have been taken directly from the website and that all spelling mistakes, grammatical errors, and typing errors are appended with an invisible [sic] and reflect the variety of ways in which different students composed, edited, and posted their on-line messages.

By the time the students read Mill, they were halfway through the course and were familiar with many of the terms used to talk about argument. As previously noted, students often used the terminology of argument during the focus group interviews, and this terminology was also found in the online posts. Terms such as “evident,” “evidence,”
"argue," "argument," "contend," "point," "point out," "refute," "valid/invalid argument," "validate," "advocate," "assertion," "example," "theorize," "plausible," and "assume" are used in many posts taken from the first Mill module, subtly demonstrating the user's knowledge of the principal course content to the instructors reading and marking the posts as well as giving the posts an authoritative flavor. Interestingly, a search of the website materials revealed that, although the terms "argue," "argument," "refute," and "refutation" were used frequently in the analysis of examples from Mill's text in the "Analysis" and "Commentary" sections of the website, the other terms employed frequently by the students were not commonly used by their instructors. The language used in the website, in fact, is very clear and straightforward. Little jargon or technical terminology is used in any of the didactic materials, and, although most of the form is declarative as the primary purpose is to provide the students with information which they would have received from lectures in a traditional format, the reader is often addressed directly through implied imperatives and questions posed throughout the material.

3.8 An online invitation: Why read "On Liberty"?

I began my analysis by looking at the website itself to identify some of the rhetorical strategies used by the instructors in the didactic materials. The introduction to Mill asks the rhetorical question "Why read "On Liberty"?" and then goes on to answer it:

Reason 3: It requires a good deal of intellectual effort to read it, and thus will prepare you for levels of reading that you might expect in University courses during the coming years-and for the kinds of careers that university graduates are likely to pursue.

Reason 4: There is pleasure to be had in working with a challenging text until you are able to read it with critical understanding. Or, to put this in slightly different terms, serious thinking can be enjoyable, which is what we hope you have been finding in this course all along.

Reason 5: Mill's emphasis on free individual inquiry, and on the fruitful encounter between opposing ideas, is a central value in a University.

Reason 6: On Liberty raises issues that are very much on our minds today - issues of personal freedom and social control, which we wrestle with in such contexts as abortion, anti-smoking regulations, "hate literature," pornography, etc etc. Mill's book can clarify your thinking about complex and difficult issues such as these.

This text is primarily didactic. In other words, its primary function is to give the students information about the rationale for reading Mill. However, the text is also a highly persuasive argumentative text, and is carefully structured to convince the students that Mill's text, though difficult and challenging, is worth the effort required to read it. In Reason 3, the reader is addressed directly as "you," and the notion of "effort," which is
what the text must persuade the reader to put forth, is equated with “intellectual.” “Intellectual effort” is equated with “reading,” the primary activity of all university students. The word University is used twice: “intellectual effort” is required for “University courses” and, by extension, in the challenging careers that “university graduates are likely to pursue.” Here, the reader is subtly positioned as a member of a community—the “University” and “university graduates.” One of the primary activities of any member of this community is reading and understanding texts, an activity which prepares them for “intellectual” work in their future studies and careers.

In Reason 4, the writer (a collective “we” that encompasses all the instructors) addresses the reader directly three times, using the “you” pronoun: “intellectual effort will prepare you”; “you are able to read it with critical understanding”; “we hope you have been finding.” The reader, directly addressed as “you,” is aligned with the most important actions he or she must take: “read” the “text,” and “read” the “text” with “understanding.” The parallel structure critical understanding and serious thinking echoes the primary importance of this overall course objective. Here, the adjectives “critical,” “challenging” and “serious” are carefully balanced with “enjoyable.” Although reading this text is a serious enterprise, its serious nature is balanced by the pleasure it can provide. The pronoun “we” is used after the direct address to the reader and includes all the instructors who “hope” that their readers have been finding pleasure as members of the university community in meeting the challenges posed by serious texts.

In Reason 5, the emphasis on “thinking” in Reason 4 is echoed by the word “ideas.” The sole topic of this short paragraph is Mill’s text, and, while neither the reader nor the instructors are mentioned, the text reiterates the importance of Mill’s book in relation to the centrality of “ideas” to the “university” community, and therefore, by extension, to the students who are now included as members.

In Reason 6, the book is related to “issues” that are of interest to everyone—not just members of the University. Here, the pronouns “we” and “our” are used several times. They do not refer only to the instructors, but include both students and instructors as members of a wider community, one which “wrestles” with “issues.” In other words, life in the university community will prepare the students to take their place as citizens after they leave the university. Like the issues in Mill’s text, the issues at stake in this larger community are “complex” and “difficult,” but Mill’s book is important in relation to this context: it can serve a larger purpose, to “clarify your thinking.” Here, the text addresses the reader directly, reiterating the primary purpose of reading the book, and carefully persuading him or her making the effort required to reading it will
pay off in both academic success and the ability to participate as a well-informed citizen in the world outside the university gates.

This example shows how carefully formulated the website materials are. The pronouns position the student/reader strategically in relation to Mill’s book and implicitly includes him or her as a member in a larger community engaged in pursuits that are serious, important, and also pleasurable in order to persuade the reader of the value of reading Mill’s work.

The “Commentary” section in the first module on Mill also addresses the reader directly. Although it is structured didactically, the text invites the reader to engage with Mill’s work in different ways:

This case of the corn-dealer’s house is a good one to keep in mind when you are considering such contemporary issues as “hate literature” in relation to “On Liberty”.

This excerpt points ahead to the next module, when the students will be asked to relate Mill’s ideas to contemporary issues. It also points out the way in which Mill uses specific examples to support and illustrate his argument in “On Liberty”, a strategy which the students are asked to emulate in this week’s posting assignment, where they are asked to use Mill’s text to support or argue against a specific proposition.

In the next example, the reader is addressed through an imperative to “post your thoughts” which invites him or her to engage in “serious” yet “enjoyable” thinking:

Think of other, analogous examples in which society would, according to Mill, be justified in punishing the expression of an opinion (Post your thoughts in the "M9.C3: Corn-dealer" thread)

3.9 Speaking up: Speaking as an “I”

The website materials reflect values and concerns of the course coordinator and other instructors who were involved in creating the course and developing the on-line material. One of the primary course themes is the importance of individual identity and individual thought. These are crucial concerns to students in their first year of university, as they are often undergoing a tremendous identity crisis. The course consultant commented:

I would imagine that... first year university students... feel as if they have... because they’re in a very big environment that they... have become nameless... coming into a big place like a university... walking into big lecture theaters... perhaps being overwhelmed... feel less and less as if they... have a voice... that they are contributing something... because they’re just one among so many... we just want to... remind them that... this is not indeed the case... that
everyone is one among so many... and... that just because you're in a big group
doesn't mean that the group thought should be any stronger... but... they
should be... maintaining... their own points of view... their independence...
it works with... ideas of diversity... it works with... um... basic ideals of the
humanities I think

The course materials reflect the values and intentions expressed by the course
coordinator and the course consultant, both of whom were very much involved in their
creation. Unlike traditional academic texts, which are formulated as declarative
statements, and adopt an authoritative stance toward the information conveyed,
(Schleppegrel, 2001; Love, 1999), presenting it in a seemingly objective, unbiased
fashion and in a monologic fashion rather than dialogic one which would "rely on the
interaction of interlocutors" in its "creation and interpretation" (Schleppelgrel, 2001, p.
444-445), the website materials are structured as dialogically as possible. The didactic
materials address the reader directly repeatedly using the pronoun "you" and
interspersing the declarative sentences containing information with interrogative and
imperative sentences to invite the reader's participation. The students/readers are
addressed and as equals whose response to the questions are of value. Invitations to
"post your thoughts" are found again and again in the website materials, giving the
students opportunities to voice their thoughts. Students are addressed as equals who
have something to contribute to an ongoing dialogue regarding Mill, and, by extension, to
the university community, even if they, like everyone else, are "one among so many."

One of the principal strategies used to engage students with the material is to
have them relate the arguments presented in the texts they read to their personal
experience, to think deeply about the issues and to relate them to their own lives, and to
look for weaknesses and incongruencies in the arguments. The interactive, dialogic
nature of the website is particularly evident in the frequent questions woven in between
didactic passages of exposition. The website is structured so that students can respond
easily and immediately by clicking a link, sharing their personal reflections and personal
responses. The questions, generally couched in the imperative, invite the students to
participate in an interactive, ongoing dialogue:

Ask yourself, as you read, whether Mill believes there is such a thing as absolute
truth;

This is not a passage that would have attracted much attention in 1859, but how
do you react to it in 2005?

But what if the majority knows that it is right, and that the minority position is an
error? Why allow error to be expressed? Why confuse and mislead people? Try to
answer this question now, taking whichever side you wish;
And here is a challenge: **Can you yourself supply a really radical argument** against the main assumptions of "On Liberty", an argument that really calls the value of the book into question? **Give it a try...**

By giving students as many opportunities as possible to respond to questions posed on the website and to share their thoughts, the course gives students an opportunity to speak up... to express their views and to be respectful of other people's views... and to value the conflict of ideas... the encounter of opposing ideas... to resist orthodoxy and... not just to run with the herd.

Given that the aims of the course are to foster and celebrate individual thought and that the website is so carefully worded to engage students and get them to respond personally to the questions, I initially assumed that the majority of students would assert their personal beliefs on-line debate in the form of "I" statements. Many of the responses are couched in the first person; for example, "I define"; "by this I mean"; "why I said that is because"; "I feel that is it important"; "therefore I think"; "I think"; "I have to agree"; "I agree"; "I do not agree"; "I disagree with your post"; "therefore, I believe"; "I believe"; "I honestly believe that" "I would just like to point out that"; "reading through the postings, I have observed that most have"; "in fact, I am on the opposite side"; "I will engage this argument head on"; "I would say that"; "I draw the conclusion," and "I object to the idea that."

Two of these responses, ""I define" and "by this I mean," reflect the students' awareness of the need to define their terms before engaging in an argument as previously noted in the discussion of social practices.

Most of the verbs used in relation to subjective positions are verbs of cognition ("I believe"; I think") or verbs that express personal opinion ("I agree"; "I disagree"; "I would say that"). Other verbs are related to seeing processes ("I have observed"; "I would like to point out"). Only one verb used in the debate has an emotive connotation: "I feel that is it important," and this verb was used in only one post. All other verbs expressed belief, thought, or opinion, suggesting that even when expressing subjective responses and explicitly positioning themselves in relation to the topic, the students eschew verbs of feeling and emotion in favour of verbs of cognition which will give their argument a more rational and objective overtone.

As the assignment for this module explicitly asked the students to express agreement or disagreement with a specific proposition and to support it with citations from Mill's text, it is interesting that roughly three times more students who responded using a direct "I" statement used expressions like "I believe" (15) or "I think" (19) than
“I agree” (7) or “I disagree” (5). In a total of 95 responses in this module, only half (51) used “I” statements to express their views.

Many students, even when they expressed their views as “I” statements, used modals and modal adverbs to make their statements more indirect and less forceful: “I have to agree”; “I honestly believe that”; and “I would say that.” Only one post used a verb stronger than “think” or “believe”: “I contend.” Another student prefaced an indirect statement of agreement by limiting the extent of his or her belief to specific circumstances: “The only way I see it plausible.”

In contrast, strong reporting verbs were used to when reporting Mill’s views: although the majority of responses used neutral reporting verbs such as “say” (says (12), is saying (2), goes on to say (2), and states (6)), Mill also asserts (1), argues (4), comments (1), contends (1), denounces (1), speaks out (1), and criticizes (1). He also remarks (1) and points out (3). Like the students, Mill thinks (1) and believes (2), but he also defines (1), discusses (2), puts it (1), theorizes (1), comments (1), notes (1), refers to (1), makes reference to (1) and mentions (1). In a total of 48 references to Mill, 22 employed the neutral verbs “say” or “state,” 10 used strong reporting verbs such as “criticize” or “denounce,” 13 used neutral reporting verbs characteristic of academic texts such as exam questions or paper topics, “define” and “discuss,” and three used verbs of cognition “theorize,” “believe,” and “think.”

The students cited Mill as speaking directly from a subject position, but two students chose to cite Mill’s text much more indirectly: “Mill appears to have validated” (1); and seems to be saying (1). Others used passive forms: “as mentioned by Mill (1); “as described by Mill” (1); and “in the words of John Stuart Mill” (1), thereby distancing themselves from Mill’s ideas.

This preliminary analysis shows that the students are more comfortable citing Mill’s views directly than with directly expressing their ideas. It also reveals that the students seem more comfortable expressing strong views (criticize, assert, argue, denounce) when they are attributed to Mill than expressing them directly, and they employ verbs with a distinctly academic association—verbs often found in essay and exam questions--when they are citing a source (define, discuss, note, comment). All the posts used some kind of evidence to support the argument, even if they chose not to use Mill’s text. This was one of the most important social practices that characterized the group, and the majority students understood and participated comfortably in this manner.

Even this preliminary analysis of the grammatical forms used in the on-line posts demonstrates that, in addition to using evidence to support their argument, the students
had appropriated vocabulary associated with the academic genre and were able to use it judiciously. I would speculate that that the use of the academic register is a deliberate choice, whether conscious or unconscious, on the students' part. The students know that their posts are read by other students and graded by their instructors, and the lexical choices and inclusion of clear evidence for their claims demonstrates the students' awareness of their instructors' expectations. The interview data confirmed that the students understood what was expected of them:

they ask you specifically what they want . . . they'll ask give evidence for your view . . . so basically with a couple of paragraphs . . . you can cover what they've asked for
there's some type of point and then there's a couple of paragraphs trying to support that point..

Most students felt that the purpose of a post was to "get to the point," and make sure it was clear: "you just have to make sure everybody understands." In fact, as the student above commented, students often perceived the need to "use all these technical terms" as interfering with their ability to state their point clearly and succinctly. Although analysis of the on-line discourse reveals that the students did, in fact, employ many features of academic genre, the students themselves clearly distinguished between writing posts and writing more formal academic essays: in writing an essay, "you're trying to make a point . . . but you have to make it in a way that. the teacher . . . gives you more marks I guess," making the students much more attentive to their own writing: "you're more conscious of "the way you have to word it" when writing an essay than when writing an online post.

When writing a research essay, students are aware of the need to present themselves assertively as "knowledgeable expert[s] providing objective information" (Schleppegrell, 2001, p. 444-445). However, when constructing their on-line posts, students do not feel the same pressure. Cognizant that others often read their posts (even if they do not respond), they adopt a dialogic rather than a monologic stance. While students do not rely on interaction as they formulate their thoughts they do anticipate "the interaction of interlocutors" during the "creation and interpretation" of their posts (Schleppegrell, 2001, p. 444-445). This may partly explain why students are reluctant to adopt too authoritative a stance in their on-line posts.

3.10 Speaking up: Interpersonal interaction

Only two posts in the first Mill module stated direct disagreement with an idea expressed by another student: "I will engage this argument head on" and "I object to the idea that." The writers are particularly careful to use indirect expressions when they
are pointing out deficiencies in others' arguments: "I **would just like to** point out that"; and "reading through the postings, I **have observed** that **most** have." In the first, the writer uses an extended modal expression (would just like to) to distance him or herself ("I") from the deficiency being "pointed out," while in the second the writer distinguishes between his or her position as observer and what "most" of the other students have said.

The majority of posts are framed as declarative sentences in which the writer simply offers opinions, facts, and arguments, and only one post explicitly invites a response: "I look forward to engaging in debate over these points." This is the only post out of the 95 in this module that echoes the ways in which the instructors invite response throughout the materials on the website.

The students' reluctance to use strong verbs such as "argue" (only one post used a strong verb, "contend") or to express disagreement was surprising to the instructors, especially when the course was first offered in the mixed-mode format. The course consultant told me that they had anticipated "heated discussions" in the online environment:

"you can write something . . . when you're not face to face with somebody, maybe they're going to write something which is might be offensive. . . so we had disclaimers everywhere. . . it never came up"

In fact, one of the major problems the instructors found initially was the students' reluctance to express disagreement with one another:

if we had a problem in the first year of teaching it was that we. . . couldn't get them to disagree with each other. . .

The instructions for mandatory posting in the first Mill module asked the students to present an argument for or against the proposition using Mill's text to support their argument. Students who chose to address the reader used a variety of strategies. One strategy was the "inclusive imperative 'let's'" (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 88):

- **Let us** make an analogy
- **Let me** draw a simple illustration.
- **Let me** commence by noting

This strategy, which includes the reader and writer as subjects, also positions reader and writer in alignment and frames the post as an implied dialogue rather than a monologic address to the reader. As discussed previously, the students were well aware that their posts were being read by others and that they might well receive comments and responses. Sometimes, "you get responses and . . . then that makes . . . kind of
like a conversation.” Although writing a post initially appears to be a solitary activity, it
does, in fact, have much in common with participating in a conversation. Through the
act of writing, writers clarify their ideas and put them in intelligible form, formulating
ideas with potential readers in mind. As Swan, Shea, Fredericksen, & Pickett observed,
the opportunity to reflect on their writing before posting it facilitates “mindfulness” and
“a culture of reflection in the course,” and this “culture of reflection” is enhanced by the
knowledge that others are reading what you write.

In this environment, writers are mindful of how their writing will be read and
interpreted, and therefore more likely to shape their writing in anticipation of a response.
Writing in anticipation of a response, the writer positions him or herself in the writing and
positions the reader as well. Just as speakers interact with one another through
language, “establishing a relationship between the person speaking now and the person
who will probably speak next” (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 180), writers interact with
readers through language to establish a relationship with their readers.

Even when the writer phrases it as “let me,” the phrase is a subtle request for
permission which the reader tacitly grants. Here, the dialogic structure of the text is most
visible. Even when on-line posts are not structured as threads in which responders take
up ideas in a previous post and comment, question, or respond to them, the writer
establishes a relationship between him or herself and the reader. In Halliday’s (1984,
1994) model of dialogue, dialogue can be analyzed and interpreted “as the expression of
interpersonal relations, “a process of exchange” that involves either a “commodity to be
exchanged: either information or goods and services” and the attendant roles associated
with exchange, “either giving or demanding” (Halliday, 1984, 1994, pp. 68-71, (cited in
Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 180-181). Halliday identifies four basic speech functions: offer,
command, statement, and question, linking them with responding speech functions
(receive a request for action or information, receive information or goods and services, or
respond to a question) and with grammatical clause structure (declarative, interrogative,
imperative, and shades of the previous three) (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 183).

Halliday extends his analysis from discourse structure to encompass the social
role(s) enacted by participants in any exchange:

... the social role that participants are occupying in an interaction will constrain the
speech functions they have access to when interacting with specific others. Thus, for
example, the social role of the ‘teacher gives access to the full range of initiating
speech functions when interacting with students, while the social role of the ‘student’
places constraints on both the frequency and types of initiations that can be made to
the teacher (and to other students (Eggins & Slade, 1997, pp. 182-183).
Analysis of the grammatical structures used by the students in their posts, therefore, can tell us a great deal about the linguistic strategies used to establish and negotiate interpersonal relations between themselves. Every text interpolates and addresses a reader, whether overtly or implicitly. The inclusive imperative is one of the linguistic choices available to students when they want to address and position their readers, but it was used infrequently by this group, and was used in only three posts in the first module and in only one post in the second Mill module. A far more common strategy was the use of “we” to include the reader and position him or her in alignment with the writer's ideas:

... whether or not the government produces the society to which we are bound

**We** can all agree that society can be a tyrant, but is it worse then a tyrannical government?

In fact, it is negative as **our** freedom will lessen when we don't have to struggle against anything. In actuality, the government is a more potent subjugator of **our** freedom of thought and expression.

**Given** this assertion, we should still strive for a government which does the best to meet everyone's best interest.

I think that government is an imperative part of human civilization, and whether we agree or disagree with some of its actions –the “less-than-satisfactory” ones due to the fact that we are not infallible as mentioned by Mill–, we have to remember that it has worked relatively well for most human populations, and some good usually comes from it.

In all these posts, the writer has used an inclusive “we” pronoun to include reader and writer as members of a common group who therefore share similar beliefs and values. This is evident in “**we** can all agree,” where the writer constructs the readers as having the same values and beliefs. In other posts, “we” is aligned with or defined as society. In one post, this alignment is clearly expressed as “the society to which **we** are bound,” while in others, it is implied. The writers make the distinction made in the proposition: “society” is opposed to “government,” and **our** freedom is threatened by government, the “potent subjugator of freedom,” and “imperative part” of civilization which “does the best” for everyone. Interestingly, the one text which references Mill does so to support an argument which may not please readers: “**we** are not infallible as mentioned by Mill.” The reference is formulated in a double negative: “not infallible,” rather than directly stating “we are fallible,” and the reference to Mill—as mentioned
by"—distances Mill from his own statement and uses a weak reporting verb to downplay the assertion as much as possible.

Rather than using a direct "I" statement, two writers have chosen to use modals to indirectly convey attitudes: "we should still strive for a government" and "we have to remember." Both modals convey a degree of obligation and therefore an implied imperative, but the strength of the obligation is mitigated by the adverbs "relatively" well and "usually" comes from it in the second example.

These examples demonstrate different strategies students use to overtly position themselves in relation to the ideas in their writing and to their readers. In another example, the writer uses the inclusive we in an implied critique of previous posts:

*It's clear we* need a definition of terminology, after reading the previous posts. *Define* society as the collection of all individuals in a country

Using "we" includes the writer in the group and softens the critique. The post continues with an imperative: "Define society," implying that the reader and writer both accept the writer's definition. Another post uses a similar strategy, moving from an inclusive imperative to an overt imperative which guides the reader through a specific line of reasoning:

Let *me* draw a simple illustration. *Assume* that citizens, who act as a group of players in a game, certainly have to follow the game rules; however, government, who play the role of a judge, can penalize those who disobey or violate the rules.

Very few of the students frame their posts this way, one which implies an authoritative stance on the writer's part and thus, the right to speak as an expert. As the previous examples demonstrate, the students generally avoid taking authoritative stance if possible and prefer more indirect ways of expressing their ideas. Using the inclusive "we" enables them to establish a sense of alignment between the reader and writer and thus implied agreement rather than express strong opinions make forceful statements that might invite argument or disagreement.

In a study exploring "the notion of writer identity as it is expressed through self-reference in the writing of L2 undergraduates at a Hong Kong university," Ken Hyland (2002) examined the frequency of the first person pronouns *I, we, me,* and *us* (p. 1092). Hyland compared frequency of use of these pronouns in the final reports prepared by graduating students and in a corpus of published academic articles. He found that published writers were four times more likely to "explicitly intervene with the first person" (p. 1098), and interviewed students and faculty to determine the reasons for this difference. Hyland noted that the 'expert writers' were far more likely to use the first person to present their arguments or claims than the students were and that students
“sought to disguise their responsibility when elaborating arguments or giving opinions.” He commented that the students certainly had arguments and ideas, but phrased them indirectly in order to “create a distance from them” (p. 1103), and therefore evaded accountability for claims made in the text. In part, this was because the student projects were done under supervision and often in close collaboration with a faculty advisor or classmate with whom they shared ideas. In part, it was because the students were aware of academic conventions that urge writers to write objectively and mask their own voice. In part, it was an overt decision not to present themselves as too assertive or to commit too strongly to a claim, particularly as many of the students came from Asian backgrounds which prize modesty over self-assertion. Hyland concluded that students “consciously avoided the most authoritative functions” and instead chose strategies that enabled them to “deny ownership and responsibility for their views” (p. 1107).

Although the website addresses the students directly and invites personal response, and many of the students do choose to use either the first person in their responses, thereby explicitly identifying themselves and positioning themselves in relation to the argument (“I think,” “I believe”), or to use a more inclusive “we” in order to signal alignment between the reader and the writer, a preponderance of the responses begin with absent or impersonal subjects. Statements which began with the impersonal “it” included:

- **It is a deception** to believe that the government belongs to everyone
- **It is easy** to imagine a situation
- **It is true** particularly in a democratic society
- **It would be safe to assume** that the type of society..
- **It is not hard to understand that** society can be a worse tyrant
- **It is a bit hard to understand why**
- **It is therefore possible**
- **It is human nature** that can tell us, a person in the government could abuse power because **it is human nature** to once be in power to stay in power and accomplish greater things

Initially, it seems that the statement is an objective statement of fact. There is no “I” making a direct statement. Rather than stating “I believe,” the writer chooses an impersonal “it”, which conveys the idea that the beliefs expressed are, in fact, a general truth believed by everyone: “it is true.” Similarly, an expression such as “it is human nature” frames the statement as a general truth believed by everyone rather than a personal statement of belief or opinion. By choosing to make the statement with an impersonal “it,” the writer evades any notion of personal responsibility for action,
portraying human beings as passively manipulated by forces beyond their control. This is congruent with the use of the passive voice, in which the agent disappears and all responsibility is attributed to “human nature,” a “thing” with no capacity to choose to act or change.

The large number of “it” clauses in the students’ writing indicated that this grammatical structure was one that deserved a deeper analysis in order to delineate the ways in which this particular “grammatical choice” reflected the students’ perception of the social context in which they were writing; in other words, how this choice “instantitate[d] that social context” (Schleppegrell, 2001, p. 432). In particular, I wanted to understand how “it” clauses could be used to negotiate the complex relationship between topic, the writer’s position, and intended reader, and the necessity to argue a case or “make your point.” A closer analysis of the sentences in which “it” clauses were found revealed that “it” clauses served several functions.

Initially, the preponderance of “it” clauses seemed to reflect the writers’ desire to adopt an objective academic stance and to present information objectively and without subjective bias as in the first example, “it is true.” On closer examination, it became evident that this kind of grammatical construction actually enables the writer is to express his or her own beliefs and opinions indirectly. Such seemingly impersonal “it” statements can be used to express a writer’s stance toward the information he or she conveys.

“Stance” refers to a writer’s attitude toward the statement he or she is making. There are several ways in which writers convey their positions and attitudes: While modals such as “should,” “must,” and “need to” convey a sense of obligation, adverbials such as “certainly,” “probably,” and likely” are used to express the writer’s evaluation of the certainty, frequency, or likelihood of an action’s occurrence. Modalization, therefore, conveys the speaker/writer’s attitude toward the topic of the following clause. This can be explicit or implicit. For example, “I’m sure that” explicitly expresses the speaker’s certainty that an action will take place. The modal adjunct “surely” serves the same purpose, but in choosing it over the more explicit form, the speaker subtly erases his or her subjective stance from the utterance, rendering the statement closer to a statement of fact than an expression of subjective opinion. At the same time, the sentence positions the reader/listener in agreement, implying that the attitude expressed is shared rather than a personal statement.

Eliminating the subjective “I” from their writing is one of the tactics that academic writers use to give argumentative texts an authoritative stance. By “choosing a linguistic form” which backgrounds subjective judgments and framing them as “objective
proposition[s]" (Love, 1999, p. 208), such writers use subtle interpersonal meanings to position themselves in relation to the text and to the reader. However, closer examination demonstrates that this particular grammatical structure has many more functions than just an “impersonal it.” Often termed the “anticipatory it” or the “preparatory it” (Hewings & Hewings, 2004, p. 101), this structure positions the grammatical subject at the end of the clause and places the “it” in normal subject position—at the beginning of the clause. There are several reasons why a writer might choose this structure: longer subjects are “more often located at the end of the clause”; the “tendency in English to present information within a sentence in the order ‘given’ to ‘new’”; and the “tendency to place relatively long and heavy elements, typically carrying a high information load, toward the end of the sentence” (Schleppegrell, 2001, p. 443; Hewing & Hewing, 2004, p. 102). However, this structure can also be adopted as a rhetorical strategy. By prefacing the information with a clause which expresses the writer’s stance, reader is subtly positioned in relation toward the following information. Presenting information in this way persuades the reader to accept the writer’s opinions or align him or herself in accordance with the writer’s stance toward the information. For example, the introduction “It is a deception to believe” infuses the following clause “the government belongs to everyone” with a skeptical overtone. It conveys the writer’s own disbelief and urges the reader to be wary of deception. Similarly, the introduction “It is true particularly in a democratic society like the one we have in Canada” infuses the following clause with a tone of authority. Such clauses are called “projecting clauses” in systemic functional linguistics because they “allow the writer to encode an evaluation which then influences” the way in which the following clause is interpreted (Hewings & Hewings, 2004, p. 102).

One possible reason for the use of the third person “it” clauses is that they convey an objective stance, and suggest that the writer’s argument is based on an appeal to the rational rather than the emotional as well as to a sense of shared understandings, while using direct “I” statements such as “I think” or “I believe” renders the author’s subjective source position clear and therefore more “vulnerable to dispute” (Love, 1999, p. 204). As noted previously, although some students do disagree directly with one another (“I disagree with your post”), many of them choose more indirect ways to express disagreement and often actively avoid it.

The notion of stance, therefore, encompasses a writer’s attitude toward the information presented and the ways in which the writer either chooses to “intrude” into the writing and “stamp” it with his or her “personal authority” or to “step back” and “disguise” his or her presence and involvement (Hyland, 2005, p. 176). In his analysis of
stance in articles written by professional academics, Ken Hyland identifies what he terms “hedges,” “boosters,” “attitude markers,” and “self-mentions” as the four main elements of stance, or grammatical structures which enable the writer to determine the “extent to which the writer chooses to project him or herself into the text” (Hyland, 2005, p. 178).

Hedges are grammatical elements which indicate “the writer’s decision to withhold complete commitment to a proposition” and present information as an opinion rather than accredited fact. Modals such as “might,” “possible,” and “may” often function as hedges. In professional articles, such strategies enable writers to evade claims of final authority in relation to the information presented and to imply instead that an argument “is based on plausible reasoning rather than certain knowledge.” Professional academics are well aware that all ideas are subject to continual discussion and review, and, by “marking statements as provisional,” convey “deference” and “respect for colleagues views.”

Boosters, on the other hand, convey the writer’s certainty about what they say. Words like “clearly,” “obviously,” and “demonstrate” carry a strong positive charge and imply an authoritative stance. In Hyland’s view, “both boosters and hedges . . . balance objective information, subjective evaluation and interpersonal negotiation,” thereby “gaining acceptance for claims” made by the writer (Hyland, 2005, p. 178-180).

Attitude markers convey the writer’s attitude toward the information. Markers can be verbs (agree, prefer), adverbs (unfortunately), or adjectives (unfortunate). According to Hyland, they signal “an assumption of shared attitudes, values and reactions,” making it difficult for the reader to dispute the arguments or information presented (Hyland, 2005, p. 180).

Self-mention refers to the explicit use of the first person. Hyland’s analysis revealed that while the use of the first person is considered a way to “gain credit for an individual perspective” in the humanities and social sciences, it is eschewed in the sciences, governed an empiricist ideology (Hyland, 2005, p. 181).

Although academic writing is thought to be factual and objective, analyses of academic texts reveal that such writing is comprised of information and reflection on the information contained. Academic writing is, in all its forms, a “persuasive endeavour involving interaction between writers and speakers” (Hyland, 2005, p. 173), and analyses of published academic articles in a variety of disciplines demonstrates the writer’s awareness of and careful address to his or her readers. Successful academics do not write texts “that plausibly represent an external reality” but also use language to “acknowledge, construct, and negotiate social relations” (Hyland, 2005, p. 173) in order to gain acceptance for the ideas presented. Research studies on academic writing have
begun to focus on strategies academic writers employ to address their readers and build convincing, persuasive arguments (Hewings & Hewings, 20004; Hyland, 2005). Not surprisingly, one of the rhetorical devices that academic writers commonly employ is the use of "it" clauses. Analyses and comparison of different genres of texts have shown "it" clauses to be relatively more frequent in academic writing as compared to other genres such as newspaper articles or fictional texts (Hewings & Hewings, 20004, p. 102).

Hewings and Hewings studied the use of "it" clauses in two computerized textual corpora. The use of computerized data enabled them to examine large quantities of text and to compare writing in published journals to writing in doctoral dissertations written by non-native speakers of English. Focusing on "it" clauses which served an interpersonal function such as commenting on, evaluating, or hedging the subsequent clause, they classified the "it" clauses as hedges, attitude markers, emphatics (boosters), and attributions (the writer attributes the idea to a specific reference or makes a general attribution with no reference).

The researchers found that students used more "it" clauses overall, but made greater uses of "it" clauses to indicate attitude, emphatics or boosters, and to attribute a statement to a reference (Hewings and Hewings, 2004, p. 106-108). They noted that many of the grammatical constructions found with "it" clauses in the dissertations suggested a "reluctance or inability" to make direct statements. On the contrary, emphatics were used repeatedly in the dissertations to make strong claims. The researchers characterized this as congruent with "more overt effort to persuade readers of the truth of their statements" on the part of the students than published writers. This indicates that students who are writing dissertations tend to adopt a more monologic stance than published academics who position themselves as members of a community in which ideas are continually interpreted, re-interpreted and negotiated. This awareness is reflected in a more dialogic stance adopted by professional academics, who employ language to both present their ideas and to "acknowledge, construct, and negotiate social relations" with their peers (Hyland, 2005, p. 173).

3.11 Stance, attitude, and modality in discussions regarding government, society, and specific examples

Tabling of statements made with it clauses revealed that such clauses were primarily used to convey strong attitudes in an indirect fashion whether the students were making general claims or using specific examples to support their arguments. I would speculate, therefore, that the students evaded using direct "I" statements when they wanted to make strong claims and used more indirect linguistic structures.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Strong implicit attitude conveyed through impersonal &quot;it&quot; clause</strong></th>
<th>This is definitely <strong>evident</strong> in our modern day society. This is <strong>especially evident</strong> when looking at the Canadian government as a responsible government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>&quot;evident&quot; has overtones of argumentative language</strong></td>
<td>it is <strong>true</strong> particularly in a democratic society like the one we have in Canada, It is <strong>true</strong> that most governments do serve the purpose to maximize the benefits of its people and it is <strong>true</strong> that there are no future plans to open up more safe injection sites in downtown Vancouver or in other cites in Canada.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strong implicit attitude conveyed through impersonal &quot;it&quot; clause</strong></td>
<td>And it is <strong>obvious</strong> that many of these government enacted rules are broken. It is <strong>obvious</strong> that in a democratic society, the majority should be heard, but they should not be in a position to abuse of their power, and rule out the minority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>&quot;true&quot; conveys the notion of a general, unquestioned truth believed by everyone</strong></td>
<td>Napoleon, Mousoulini, Sadam Hussien are <strong>obvious</strong> examples of tyranic governments. which the argument is more obviously,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strong implicit attitude conveyed through adjectival Obvious + noun</strong></td>
<td>Obviously + verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>&quot;obvious&quot; is a very strong word, implying that it should be obvious now even if not before</strong></td>
<td>This <strong>obviously</strong> eliminates the possibilities of idea dictatorship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using the impersonal "it" distances the writer from the strong claim or opinion expressed. There is no subjective "I," speaking. Rather than stating "I believe," the writer expresses his or her beliefs as a general truth believed by everyone: "it is true." Similarly, an expression such as "it is human nature" positions the statement as a general truth believed by everyone rather than a personal statement of belief or opinion. By framing the statement with an impersonal "it," the writer also evades any notion of personal responsibility for action, portraying human beings as passively manipulated by forces beyond their control. This is congruent with the use of the passive voice. Using an expression such as "it is obvious" implies that it should be obvious, but framing it as an impersonal statement rather than a subjective opinion.

In the expressions "It would be safe to assume that the type of society" and "It is not hard to understand that society can be a worse tyrant," the verb is distanced from the impersonal subject by a modal expression or a double negative, further weakening the statement. Similarly, the writer chooses to weaken the strong claim that people who believe "that the government belongs to everyone" have been deceived by making it an indirect and impersonal "it" statement: "It is a deception to believe."
Similar strategies can be found in statements where writers use the strong verb "argue." The website materials draw the students' attention to the way in which Mill anticipates counter-arguments. Several students employed the same strategy, but used indirect language to distance themselves from the counter-arguments that might be employed against them. Rather than directly expressing disagreement with an argument, one writer used the expression "I am sure that it can be argued that society can be a greater tyrant than government." The writer's certainty ("I am sure") is separated from the argument by the impersonal "it" and also by the use of the passive voice, implying that it is not the writer's argument and that, in fact, the writer doesn't know who, if anyone, would make the argument. Other posts used the vocabulary of argument in impersonal sentences such as "It can be even argued further," "Even if people may argue," and "One may argue," "Even if one were to argue," and "this is difficult to argue." All these posts distance the writer from the argument and used general subjects rather than specific examples.

Hewings and Hewings' discussion of the use of "argue" is particularly interesting in relation to the present study. They noted that the verb "argue" was found far more often in "it" clauses in dissertations than in published articles, while in published journals it was used when reporting others' views unless the writer directly contested those views (Hewings and Hewings, 2004, p. 109), again suggesting that novice writers used the verb more often than more experienced writers to present strong claims, but at the same time, adopted the more impersonal "it" clause to do so. In this study, the verb is not used unless it is attributed to Mill or to report views that an unspecified other might hold and which the writer is contesting.

Several students employed general subjects such as "people" and "one":

**People's acts** are always controlled by social opinion and interference

**One may argue** that we are bound ... the question we must ask ourselves is

Therefore, based on this explanation, **one can assume** that society which in the most elementary terms may be defined as the people; actually the government

**Even if one were to argue** that people are able to act out against society in their own ways,

Use of such general and subjects (it, one, there is, there are, etc.) may be a strategy used by the students to establish an impersonal, academic tone in their posts. Certainly, the use of "one" is rarely found in North American English, except for academic texts. In addition, a very large number of the responses contain sentences structured in the passive form so that the subject is completely absent. Where people are referred to
as subjects, they are often referred to generically as “one” or as a group (“people”) or as “society” (the term used in the original proposition).

3.12 Modals, Hedges, and Boosters

The students used very few hedges, such as “might,” “possible,” or “may.” Impersonal “it” clauses were used more frequently for this purpose. While the students did use boosters, such as “obvious,” “true,” and “evident,” they situated them in “it” clauses rather than making direct “I” statements and taking a strong authorial stance.

Two modals recurred frequently in the students’ posts: “should” and “must.” Both are modals which indicate necessity or obligation, and were used almost equally in passive and active forms. Whether used in the passive or the active form, both modals were used to express a strong necessity.

| “Should” indicates necessity or obligation. | Further, government and society should be distinguished in the fact that government expected code of its citizens (which make up a society) takes the form of written legislature Generally, I feel that it is important the majority should be heard, but they should not be in a position to abuse of their power, If the policies of the government facilitate the encroachment, is it society or the government that should be held responsible? that are preventing them from being treated with respect The argument of whether society is worse than government, should be dissected at the perspective of which one holds the power Sure, Mills criticizes those who believe that the will of the majority should be followed absolutely, yet he also states but rather by convincing a certain opinion to be the truest or best ‘notion’ that should be accepted by all Usually, this project should be held and put aside but it is not because society should be ‘the will of the people’ |
| Should + passive voice | In theory a government should be representative of the society it is meant to administer |
| Obligation for action to take place but no agent specified | The ideal way of how a society should function should depend on the society itself |
| happen | **Shouldn’t we choose** to govern based upon our opinion, or the opinions of the majority, Meaning that society **should have power** over the government  
we **should still strive for** a government which does the best to meet everyone’s best interest.  
There is no law, that I know off, that states that discrimination against these groups **should** occur, yet it does  
that society it protected from itself (tyranny of majority) and it **should not matter** whose side (opinion-wise) is being protected.  
**Should** society, voters in this case, impede on the rights of the minority, it does so through the government.  
the idea of how “marriage **should be** a union of a man and a woman", it is the authority of the majority in the society  |
| Active verbs: function, choose, strive |  |
| Occur |  |
| Also used with “have” once to talk about power |  |
| Also used with “be” once to indicate an ideal state |  |

| Must – implies strong necessity or obligation  
Used with passive and voice  
Must + BE + Ved | and in the spirit of Mill’s point that one’s beliefs **must** be weighed against the arguments,  
Mill also writes that many things in society **must** be “expressed with equal freedom  
Thus, minorities **must** be protected against the will of the majority since it may try to take away the liberty of the minority.  |
| Active voice  
Expresses strong necessity  
Must + V | Further, In order for there to be a ruling and successful democratic government, society **must** buy into its ideals  
The question we **must** ask ourselves is whether or not the government  
Government sets perimeters under which both individuals and society as a whole **must** function in order to avoid punishment  
one **must** look at it in a way that society is made up of the masses and in terms of power very different than a Government  |

In a research study on undergraduate academic writing, Robyn Woodward-Kron looked at feedback and comments given by graduate student tutors on undergraduate student essays on education. Linguistic analysis of the feedback revealed specific ways in which the markers were socializing the students into the discursive practices valued in academic writing. She found that the tutors often replaced terms such as ‘writings’ with more specific terms such as ‘research’ or ‘evidence,’ terms which “reflected the knowledge-building practices of the disciplines.” Similarly, ‘nature-nurture theory’ was replaced by ‘nature-nurture debate’” (Woodward-Kron, 2004, section 5.1.1., para 1). Woodward-Kron also found that the tutors often adjusted degrees of modality in the students writing, modifying absolute claims to include a degree of hedging. Comments
such as 'proves is rather strong' and 'I think' or 'I believe' were frequently expressed through more impersonal constructions such as 'it is essential' or 'it seems,' features of "mature academic discourses, in which arguments and propositions tend to be expressed impersonally" (section 5.1.1., para 2). Woodward-Kron concluded that marker feedback attempted to "socialize students into the discursive practices of the discipline," and attended most to "how the specialist knowledge of the discipline was constructed" (section 5.1.2., para 4). Our analysis of the lexical choices and discursive strategies employed by these students echo Woodward-Kron's findings.

3.13 Preliminary observations

In the next chapter, I will look at the discursive strategies students used when incorporating evidentials from historical or contemporary examples rather than from Mill. As we will see, I noticed almost immediately that students used more "I" statements and spoke much more strongly and directly when referring to evidence drawn from contemporary or historical examples than when referring to Mill's text and speculated on the reasons why this might be so. Possible reasons include:

- Students view Mill as an authority but are reluctant to directly appropriate his text. As we noted previously, strong reporting verbs were used far more often when attributed to Mill than in direct "I" statements. Mill's prose is complex and often difficult to understand and the students may well fear that strong claims will draw attention to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the text.

- The students are aware that the course coordinator and their TAs have read Mill previously and are familiar with his ideas. Perhaps they fear saying the "wrong thing" or showing that they have not read or understood Mill. As they are equally aware that they are being graded on their posts they may choose to speak indirectly.

- Students mentioned in the interviews that they would have preferred to choose their own side of the argument. This may represent a form of resistance to the assignment.

- Some of the indirectness of the students' language may reflect an inability to clearly establish the connection between Mill's evidence and the claim they are arguing. They use general subjects (people, some, one) and general statements (it/this) to introduce perspectives, opinions and evidence that "belong to society at large rather than exclusively to the individual writer" thereby deflecting "attention away from individual opinion" and emphasizing "broader community views" (Coffin & Hewings, 2004, p. 165), thereby creating a sense that readers and writer share similar views.

- The students come from a wide variety of backgrounds, and many are of Asian origin. Many of the students are non-native speakers of English. Traditionally, in Asian cultures, as Ken Hyland observed, modesty is valued and self-assertion is censured. Additionally, Asian cultures often view the written word as a repository of knowledge not meant to be interrogated or
critiqued. The students may feel that it is inappropriate to speak out too strongly when discussing Mill—or a claim that they believe Mill made (as many of the students seem to believe)

Our analysis of the linguistic choices students make reflects the complexity of an apparently straightforward task: composing a two-paragraph online post. Conscious of the necessity to argue their case and make a clear point, the students must also position themselves in relation to the topic and to their readers. Authorial stance, therefore, is not a simple matter of deciding whether to adopt the authorial “I” or the third person, but encompasses constant linguistic choices which infuse the information with a carefully balanced degree of authorial stance, convey subtle shades of meaning, interpolate the reader in the text, and position the writer in relation to the reader, while at the same time leaving open a space for continued negotiation of meaning and further dialogue. The linguistic choices and discursive strategies the students use reflect the complexity of the task.
Chapter 4
Engaging with Evidence

4.1 Academic writing and evidentials

Evidentials are one of the most characteristic features of academic texts, whether peer-reviewed articles published in academic journals, book reviews, grant proposals, conference submissions, or student research essays. As “disciplinary discourse has become a means of funding, constructing, evaluating, displaying and negotiating knowledge” in diverse academic disciplines with the goal of adding new research findings to “a body of certified knowledge” (Hyland, 2000, p. 5), researchers need to explicitly situate themselves within the context of “certified” knowledge and to establish the validity of their claims in relation to it. Texts construct knowledge by carefully situating the author’s claims in relation to previous research, and negotiating their validity through convincing arguments and appropriate tone. Academic writers in different disciplines, therefore, employ “different appeals to background knowledge, different means of establishing truth, and different ways of engaging with readers” (Hyland, 2000, p. 3). While what is considered valid evidence might differ from discipline to discipline, evidentiality is central to this endeavor.

Evidentials are defined as the “metalinguistic representations of an idea from another source” (Thomas & Hawres, 1994, p. 129, cited in Hyland, 2005, p. 31). In Toulmin’s formulation of an argument, evidentials are the “data” or evidence which support the claim. Evidentials do not function solely to report or represent ideas, but also convey a writer’s attitude or position in relation to the ideas reported, including the degree to which an idea is reliable (certainly, probably, somewhat), the mode of knowledge (belief, induction, hearsay), and indications of the writer’s stance (clearly, however, similarly) (Barton, 2004), p. 72). Evidentials provide evidence and support for the author’s claims, while at the same time they “guide the reader’s interpretation” of the text and “establish an authorial command of the subject.” For both students and professional academics, evidentials situate the writer’s arguments within a “community based literature” which provides it with “important support”:

Evidentials distinguish who is responsible for a position and while this may contribute to a persuasive goal, it needs to be distinguished from the writer’s stance towards the view, which is coded as an interpersonal feature (Hyland, 2005, p. 51-52).

In addition to direct reference or citation of evidential support, writers also explain, elaborate, or reflect on it. This additional information may provide further explication as to how the writer situates his or her argument in relation to the evidence.
or may refer directly to the reader’s knowledge by giving further definitions or examples to clarify evidential statements.

The most common form of evidentials in formal research papers, doctoral dissertations and published journal articles is citation. Citation, which is “central to the social context of persuasion,” provides evidence for arguments, demonstrates the validity of writer’s arguments in relation to previously established knowledge, negotiates between and situates the writer’s claims and position in relation to often conflicting views. Citations help writers to demonstrate connections to prior knowledge and research while at the same time emphasizing the writer’s “originality and divergence to what has gone before” (Hyland, 2005, p. 117).

For student writers, the use of evidentials serves a similar purpose. Primarily, evidentials enable them to “establish a creditable writer identity” by “showing familiarity with the literature and with an ethos that values a disciplinary research tradition” (Hyland, 2005, p. 56). In other words, evidentials display the writer’s familiarity with the discipline, show the professor of TA who is marking the paper that the writer has done his or her homework, and enable the writer establish an authoritative stance. Through evidentials, the student writer validates his or her argument in relation to an established body of knowledge and demonstrates his or her right to be taken seriously by experts in the field.

In an analysis of argumentation in writing by ESL students taking an “English Enhancement” course for undergraduate students in a Hong Kong university, Desmond Allison identified the most problematic aspects in the student samples as:

1. assertions and strong writer commitments that lack warrant (necessary evidence being absent, inconclusive, or inconsistent with claims made)—one such example is when a writer asserts that something is “always” the case, despite either the unlikelihood of this being so or actual evidence to the contrary in the essay;

2. attempts to qualify assertions that are liable to convey vagueness or equivocation over content, relative to other indications of the writer’s stance and reasoning (compare to a certain extent and totally different as indications of a degree of contrast);

3. assertions that state the obvious, from the reader’s perspective, thus tending to reflect unfavorably on the writer’s competence-initial attempts by ESL students to write introductions that delineate an approach to an issue in their essays can backfire in this respect. (Allison, 1995, p. 10).

In her study of tutor feedback to novice academic writers, Robyn Woodward-Kron’s study observed that the tutors focused on this aspect of their students’ writing, advising students to include more references to established sources and editing and correcting citations. They were insistent that students needed to situate their knowledge
claims by intertextual references to established academic writers, thereby enabling them to "build up knowledge claims by drawing on the explanation of other authors" and to give "authority" to knowledge claims they make "by referring to published research" (section 5.1.1., para 2) as established academic writers do. Inclusion of specific discipline-related terminology and intertextual references, in the tutors' view, gave the students' work more authority and helped them to speak within and speak to members of a disciplinary discourse community which would recognize and acknowledge the validity of their claims. By encouraging the students to ground their arguments in the "explanation of other authors" and to carefully "clarify logical relations" so that their arguments were carefully warranted, the tutors were socializing the students into the discursive practices of the academic community and the ways in which discursive practices construct disciplinary knowledge. Woodward-Kron concluded that although "marker feedback did attempt to socialize students into the discursive practices of the discipline," it attended most to "how the specialist knowledge of the discipline was constructed" (section 5.1.2., para 4).

4.2 Academic writing and the online environment

A great deal of the research on academic writing has compared professional academic writing with the writing produced by novices or students in order to identify the specific features of professional academic writing which can be explicitly taught to students. Findings of these studies were included in the literature review. As we are primarily interested in online writing in academic contexts, two studies are of particular interest to us.

Judith Lapadat (2000) examined on-line interactions in three graduate education courses to "investigate the idea that discursive interaction in asynchronous, text-based online courses may be uniquely suited to fostering higher order thinking, social construction of meaning, and shifts in perspective" (p. 8). She noted more participation and a higher quality of discussion when she made discussion a requirement and marked participation, commenting that "class members became intensely engaged in the course and contributed many, lengthy, deeply thoughtful remarks to the discussion" which "exceeded minimum requirements for participation" and that, in general, "the level of discussion was superior to what I had observed in teaching the same course F2F" (p. 8). These observations led her to wonder "why this online environment appeared to be so successful in scaffolding students' thinking about course themes" (p. 8).

Lapadat characterized the "online textual environment" in which "contributions show a blend of both written language and oral language characteristics" may have facilitated a higher "cognitive level of the discourse" (p. 15). As the participants in her
classes were graduate students with "academic habits of mind" and the academic context itself "foregrounds hyper-literate academic discourse," including "complete, well-formed sentences, literate grammatical structures with complex clausal structures rather than the additive, aggregative, and redundant patterns found in oral texts," the students tended to produce clearly formulated contributions characterized by "textual argument structures that freeze meaning" and rely on readers' ability to look back and "use of precise, formal vocabulary" (p. 17). While the students employed "a literate pattern of academic argumentation," "they also inserted conversational elements into their contributions" including "appeal to personal anecdotes and stories . . . to anchor their points" (pp. 17-18). Lapadat concluded that the "oral-like aspect of online discussion led very naturally to participants making theory-practice connections through writing in the first person, stating opinions, and offering practical examples," (p. 18) which enabled students to reflect on and theorize about their own practice as teachers.

Lapadat also observed that graduate students emulated the "objective, detached, omniscient authorial voice" found in "professional publications, school textbooks, and traditional academic texts" when writing formal papers, but, by asking students to "reflect on and theorize about their own practice" in their online discussion enabled them to make "theory-practice connections through writing in the first person, stating opinions, and offering practical examples" (p. 18) couched in the more informal spoken register of online discourse. In Lapadat's view, the online environment, and particularly the mixture of spoken and written registers facilitated these connections and led to far greater learning than would have been possible in face to face discussions or by writing formal research papers. The students achieved personal insights and goals through the act of sharing their writing and reflections online with their peers.

Mary Lea compared the features of academic writing in online posts and in formal research papers in an online graduate course. She noted that "considerable emphasis is placed upon what students can learn from one another, and upon supporting a collaborative learning environment" (p. 164). The tutor was not expected to provide authoritative views, and served as "facilitator rather than an academic authority" (p. 175). The students in the course were explicitly instructed to include references to their peers' online contributions in their research papers, just as the students in this study are. Lea observed that

More traditional academic convention might expect the work of the recognised and authoritative published author to be foregrounded, and experiential or anecdotal evidence provided by the student to illustrate the authoritative evidence. In this course students make reference to published works in both of these ways but appear to feel
quite comfortable foregrounding their own debates and experience rather than those of a recognised authority. This is more in line with conventions adopted by established academic writers, who often foreground their own voice as authoritative, depending upon the conventions of the discipline (2001, p.174-175).

Lea felt that this could be, in part, attributed to the course content (CMC and learning) and the online environment, “with its focus on collaborative learning and the breaking down of traditional boundaries between novice and expert members of the discourse community,” (p. 175). I would add that by asking the students to refer to student contributions as well as those of “recognized authority,” the course facilitates connections between theory and practice as in Lapadat’s course and validates the students’ knowledge and experience as “authoritative evidence” in its own right, enabling the students to foreground their experience and their voices as authoritative.

4.3 Academic writing in the online environment: The case of Studies in English Prose

This course in this study also breaks down the “traditional boundaries” between “novices and expert members.” The teaching assistants in this course served as facilitators rather than authorities, and were very careful not to position themselves as authorities when leading discussion sections. The TAs did not participate in or guide the online discussions at all, although the students were well aware that their online posts were being read and graded by the TAs. The course coordinator did not intervene or contribute to any of the online discussions in the sections, but he did read and contribute to discussions that evolved in response to questions in the “Commentary,” “Argumentative Strategies” or “Passing Notes” sections of the website. His contributions were always carefully framed to invite response rather than as comments on what students had said. The following responses are typical:

Caroline’s critique of Mill’s optimistic assumptions about human nature is an important comment on “On Liberty”, and I hope there will be further discussion of whether Mill’s 1859 views about “rational opinions and rational conduct” seem tenable in 2005.

Kevin has raised an important question about “On Liberty”—its conception of truth—and this is not an easy matter to resolve.

The course coordinator’s comments were not evaluative but often confirmed that an important issue had been raised by a student and generally included an invitation to further discussion.

As in Lea’s study, all postings in the discussion boards, “Passing Notes,” and “Commentary” sections were considered reference materials for the essays and final
examination. The students were not asked to use secondary sources in their essay but to include contributions from their peers, further validating the students' contributions as authoritative.

4.4 Writing and identity

As the principal amount of a professional academic's time is spent writing, most academics have established a professional identity as a member of a disciplinary discourse community on paper and are comfortable negotiating the a balance between establishing an authoritative stance from which they can speak as an expert on their topic and at the same time opening discursive spaces in which alternative opinions and conflicting views may be heard in their writing. Judicious use of evidentials is one way in which they maintain this difficult balance. Student writers, on the other hand, are still in the process of situating themselves within the academic community or within a specific discipline. They bring a wide variety of experience, both lived experience and educational background; to the written page, and often struggle to find an authentic way to speak, an enterprise which requires constant negotiation between conflicting "authorial selves."

In her study of the experience of mature students, identity, and academic writing, Roz Ivanic (1998) suggests that "there are three ways of thinking about the identity of a person in the act of writing" (Ivanic, 1998, p. 24). She distinguishes between the 'autobiographical self,' or a writer's personal, subjective sense of identity informed both by the events in which the writer has experienced and by how the writer has represented them to him or herself; the 'discoursal self,' or the 'self as author,' the 'self' constructed through the discourse characteristics of a text and conveyed through writing; and the 'self as author,' or the writer's position, opinions, and beliefs (Ivanic, 1998, pp. 24-26). This self is concerned with establishing an authorial 'voice' or an authoritative stance the writer establishes. This aspect of the self is particularly significant in relation to academic writing, as "writers differ considerably in how far they claim authority as the source of the content" and "how far they establish an authorial presence in their writing" (Ivanic, 1998, p. 26). The authorial self is particularly problematic for newcomers to an academic discipline, in which they must negotiate between their personal opinions, beliefs, and values and those of the established experts in their field. Therefore, the authorial self in any form of academic writing tells us the kind of "authority that the student feels she can lay claim to" (Lea, 1999, p. 108).

Ivanic's study, a detailed case study of eight mature students and their struggle to construct identities for themselves and find a voice as academic writers, reveals the difficulties that student writers experience in negotiating between conflicting subject
positions as they attempt to integrate the knowledge they bring to their academic studies, their personal experience, and the interpretive frameworks which frame their perceptions with the knowledge, values, and interpretive frameworks of the academic genre through the act of writing. Ivanic carefully distinguishes between 'genre' and 'discourse,' as these "foreground different aspects of identity":

Genres are shaped by institutionally defined purposes, roles, and the social relationships associated with them, such as 'student' . . . the conventions of genres make available certain roles and role relationships which people may conform to, or they may resist. Discourses, by contrast, are shaped by subject-matters and ideologies . . . by making particular discourse choices, writers are aligning themselves with particular interests (in terms of subject-matter) and ideologies. In recognizing the way in which writing constructs identities it is important to keep both of these aspects of identity in mind (Ivanic, 1998, p. 46).

Ivanic's distinction is one to keep in mind, as the students in this study were also negotiating the demands of an "institutionally defined purpose" and role with the "subject matters" and "ideologies" which shaped their autobiographical selves and those to which they were exposed during the course. They also drew from a wide range of discourses, including those from their cultural, educational, and personal backgrounds in their writing. As Ivanic' study demonstrates, student writers are "not only drawing intertextually on the discourses of the community they are entering," i.e. the academic community, but also bring a wide variety of discourses with them, which may either compete with or interanimate one another as they are integrated with the academic discourses students acquire (p. 85). In fact, and, as we will see, one of the greatest benefits of participation in the online discussion boards was the opportunity it provided to integrate and interanimate diverse discoursal identities with academic content and perspectives.

Academic writing is not simply a matter of turning in a five paragraph or five page essay with a clear thesis, topic sentences, and conclusion with correctly formatted quotations and a reference page. A research paper does not simply convey information from research but also enacts conflicts of identity as students "struggle with the dominant discourses and practices of the university and its different socio-cultural settings" (Lea, 1999, p. 108) and seek to integrate these discourses and practices with the ones that comprise their autobiographical selves.

As evidentials are central to the "dominant discourses" with which students struggle in their attempt to negotiate the kind and amount of authority to which they feel entitled to "lay claim," the ways in which students employ them can tell us a great deal
about how the students position themselves in relation to the disciplinary knowledge, the kind and amount of authority to which they can lay claim, and ways in which students have negotiated the delicate balance between autobiographical self, discoursal self, and authorial self in their writing.

I have analyzed the discourse surrounding evidentials in examples from the first Mill Module in order to identify discursive patterns most often used and to understand how students employed them while negotiating the delicate balance between sometimes conflicting imperatives to: 1) state their claims and provide clearly warranted evidence; 2) instill a convincing, persuasive tone into their arguments; 3) develop and position themselves in relationship to the argument; 4) guide the reader's interpretation; and 5) establish a relationship with the reader.

4.5 Engaging With the Evidence and With the Reader

4.5.1 Overview of examples

Although the instructions in the module asked the students to read Mill carefully and to use his text to support their proposition, many students chose either to use contemporary or historical examples in conjunction with citations from Mil's text or to use such examples without citing Mill's text at all. Although the majority of students included evidence to support their argument, almost 15 percent of the posts argued the proposition in very general terms incorporating evidence of any kind.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of posts that used Mill only</th>
<th>17</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of posts that used Mill and contemporary or historical examples</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of posts that used contemporary or historical examples only</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of posts that used general statements as evidence</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of posts that used specific examples (n.b. many posts used more than one)</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of posts that used no evidence or reference to Mill</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total number of posts in this section = 97</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the table above, it is evident that many more students used contemporary or historical examples as evidence for their claims than used Mill's text, and, even when students referred to Mill's text, they included contemporary or historical examples as well.

Although the assignment asked the students to argue a given proposition and to provide clearly warranted evidence from Mill's text by including "appropriate quotations
from "On Liberty" in their posting, many students interpreted the invitation to "post an argument" as an invitation to include historical or contemporary examples of the "tyranny of government" or the "tyranny of society." Rather than using Mill to argue their point, they preferred to use examples. As one student put it, "To illustrate Mill's point, we need only turn to one of the latest issue being debated in Canadian politics." It should be noted that, although the proposition has a Mill-like flavour, it is not, as many students assumed, a proposition that Mill himself made.

Of the 65 posts which included specific examples, historical examples included: Hitler and Nazism (10); Stalin (3); the French Revolution (1); the War Measures Act (2); de Tocqueville (1); the Roman Catholic Church (1); the Japanese invasion of China (1); as well as mention of Charlemagne and Akbar with no further elaboration. Contemporary examples were: gay marriage (6) and discrimination against homosexuals (3); the suppression of religion in Communist countries (2); the invasion of Iraq (2); Iraq and the media (4); the Patriot Act (1); the Tiennamen Square massacre (1); the Arab-Israeli conflict (1); apartheid (1); the Civil Rights Movement (4) and Martin Luther King (whom they had previously read (3)). Several posts also referred to Orwell (Politics and the English Language, which they had previously read (2)); and 1984, which they had not read (1); Vietnamese boat people (1); arranged marriage in Korea (1); the President of Egypt (1); a newspaper article about bullying (1); and the gothic lifestyle (1).

The total number of references to historical or contemporary examples (65) is substantially greater than references to Mill (17), and it is in speaking about these examples that students express their views most directly, openly expressing agreement and disagreement about the issues.

Lexical choices used in relation to evidentials include words drawn from a distinctly academic register, including words from the language of argument, including, "evident," "evidence," "argument," "assertion," "argue," "thesis," "debatable," and "refute," choices which, I suspect, were meant to appeal to the instructors and TAs reading and marking the posts.

4.5.2 Pronouns and Positions

I began by my analysis of the use of evidence by looking carefully at the pronouns to identify the ways in which the students positioned themselves in relation to the evidence and to one another. One difference was immediately evident. Many more students introduced the specific historical and contemporary examples they used with the personal subject pronoun "I" than when they referred to Mill's text:

- To make my argument sound, let's think of an example.
• I will use a modern day example of how Society can be a worse tyrant than government.
• As an example here I would like to place the struggle of the African-Americans in the United States.
• I remember that Martin Luther King wrote
• I want everyone to pay attention to the Tiananmen massacre which happened in China at the year of 1989.
• I am sure that many of us have felt during their lives the solid power of the group – it is so difficult to oppose an opinion, which has been accepted as a custom by the majority of individuals in the group.
• Why I said that is because
• I'm thinking of vandalism, mass riots etc
• I went through a historical timeline and a 'society' that has embarked on 'genocide' is the French during the Revolution

In these examples the students directly state that they have chosen a specific example, and, in one example the writer directly addresses the others in a statement with strong commanding overtones: “I want everyone to pay attention to the Tiananmen massacre which happened in China at the year of 1989.” This opening statement is followed by a long description of the events and a website with further information for anyone interested in finding out more about the Tiananmen massacre. The writer's conviction that this incident illustrates the “tyranny of government” is obvious, and the writer concludes with a strong “I” statement that expresses her point of view: “In my perspective, no matter how much the majority (the society) had contributed into making their country more liberal, I doubted their efforts because the government is the only power to influence a society.” When using an example drawn from the writer's personal experience and knowledge, the writer feels comfortable speaking directly as an “I” and in communicating deeply felt convictions.

The students also used inclusive “we,” “us,” and “our” statements when discussing historical or contemporary examples. In this post, the writer expresses certainty in his claim because it is based on a common experience:

I am sure that many of us have felt during their lives the solid power of the group – it is so difficult to oppose an opinion, which has been accepted as a custom by the majority of individuals in the group

By including his readers in the statement and referring to an experience common to all of us—the difficulty of resisting peer pressure—the writer can state his position with certainty (I am sure) and therefore has little hesitation in using an “I” pronoun.

Another post also discusses the ways in which the group forces the individual to conform but addresses the reader in a slightly different manner:

There are some ways like peer pressure, and ethical enforcement. They made you feel guilty if you don't behave the way they like. They accomplished this by making
the people around you keep on telling you the ethical guideline set by them. Sooner or later, you will feel guilty and behave the way they like.

I think that the phrase “ethical guideline,” although it is often found in official contexts, including medical ethics and ethical research practices, is used here to refer to the everyday sense of right and wrong that our families instill in us as children. This post addresses the reader directly as a “you,” positioning “you,” the reader, in direct opposition with an unspecified “they” who have the power to control “your” behavior by instilling “you” with a sense of guilt. Here, the writer positions the reader through pronouns but does not include himself in the process. Although he is referring to a common experience that most of us have had, he positions the reader as a solitary “you” rather than an inclusive “we,” reinforcing the reader’s powerlessness and inability to resist the pressure “they” exert.

Other students also addressed and included their readers through the use of “we” statements when presenting their examples. In these examples, the “we” positions the readers in alignment with the writer through knowledge of a common experience that illustrates the writer’s point:

- looking back at the history, we can find many situations
- The government has the power to be tyrannical, and history has shown us many times how this is true
- We see this all the time in all sorts of political campaigns.
- Using Mill’s opening statement to chapter 2, we are given a very powerful and, in the 21st century US, a very controversial example of government’s continued dominance, tyranny, and encouraged “mental despotism” (78).
- However, we can find a lot more and worse examples of tyrannies committed by public authorities/ rulers/ governments than the collective majorities: the holocaust led by Hitler, the massacre of Americans by colonial powers, and the ongoing war by G. Bush’s administration, just to name a few.
- if we look back at the actions of previous European leaders, we can confirm that a tyrannical government can do much worse

The choice of verbs is significant: we can find and we see are both verbs related to vision. The subject “we” is positioned as a researcher who finds and records data. Similarly, we as researchers can confirm our data through long back at previous examples. In the example, “we are given a very powerful and, in the 21st century US, a very controversial example of government’s continued dominance, tyranny, and encouraged "mental despotism," we are not positioned as active researchers but as passive witnesses to the example which confirms Mill’s concept of “mental despotism.”

Two of the posts position the readers even more directly as witnesses to the events recounted:

- We all witnessed those huge rallies against U.S government by its own people.
Lastly, we have witnessed the overthrow of governments in East Germany, Russia and Kenya, which had tyrants in the last twenty years.

The verb "witness" not only positions writer and readers in alignment through shared experience but directly positions them as witnesses who are able to attest to the truth of the writer's evidence. The verb has very powerful connotations: witness testimony is considered factual evidence in courtrooms and testimonials describing the horrific events such as the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and the explosion of Chernobyl are considered truthful historical records. It should be noted that historians and philosophers continue to debate the status of such claims, but as we are discussing lexical choice, we can make the claim that a writer who uses this verb invokes the legal and historical connotations the word conveys.

In addition to using the inclusive we to position their readers in alignment through shared knowledge of the historical or contemporary evidence cited, the writers also address their readers directly. Several writers used the inclusive imperative "let's" (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 88) to create an implied dialogue rather than a monologic address to the reader:

- Let's put Mill's statement into the context now of the German people
- To make my argument sound, let's think of an example.
- Let us make an analogy
- Let me draw a simple illustration.
- Let's take gay rights for example.

This strategy affiliates the writer and reader as co-constructors of the text while at the same time guiding the reader's understanding of the argument. "Let me" is of particular interest, as it positions the reader as giving tacit permission for the writer to take action while at the same time establishes a clear train of thought which the reader is expected to follow. Other writers directly address the reader through an imperative:

- Take the controversy of gay marriage as an example.
- Take the state of our gay rights, at least my local MP has been recorded stating that
- Take the status of Christianity under Communist Rule like in China as an example.
- Just take gay marriage as an example.
- Take Adolf Hitler for example

By addressing the reader directly, the writer adds an overtly dialogic overtone to the post, which acquires a conversational quality. The hybrid status of the internet as partly written/ partly oral language gives writers access to a different range of discourses than those available in more formal written genres, and the writers in these examples employ more informal, conversational register when drawing upon a common discourse than when referring to Mill's text, with its highly wrought prose style.
In the following example, the writer concludes with a direct address to the reader:

So is the society a worse tyrant than the government? Or is it the other way round? **You decide.**

In this example, the writer eschews the neat conclusion expected in written formats and includes the reader as not only a co-constructor of the text, but one who is given the responsibility to reach a conclusion based on the evidence provided rather than guided to it by the writer's argument.

Several posts included questions, which are generally more common in spoken discourse than in formal written discourse:

- If our government is what defines our society, how is that our society can be more tyrannous than our body of government?
- If the policies of the government facilitate the encroachment, is it society or the government that should be held responsible?
- How could people oppress themselves with this type of self-government?
- But then, is social tyranny really inescapable?
- If our opinions are primarily based upon self-interest, why would we choose to be governed by the opinions/interests of a few?
- Why would the wealthy and powerful want to change the status quo when they have nothing to benefit?

These questions cannot be classified as rhetorical questions, a feature of academic writing in which the writer begins with a question that he or she goes on to answer, as the writers of these posts leave the questions open, inviting the reader to supply the missing answer. Again, the writers engage their readers in a dialogue, anticipating and inviting a response. This strategy resembles the carefully structured "discursive space" in academic papers, a space left open for dialogue and negotiation of knowledge. The lexical choices, however, are more characteristic of written academic discourse, characterized by frequent abstract nouns ("government," "society," "policies," "encroachment," "tyranny" "status quo") and verbs which are used metaphorically to relate abstractions, "govern," and "oppress" (Ivanic, 1998, p. 264). These excerpts show the variety of discourses the students draw on in their writing and the hybrid nature of the online environment, a mixture of written and spoken language in which abstract concepts and everyday examples are juxtaposed.

A substantial number of posts referred to evidence in a general way rather than to specific examples. As in these examples, the writers tend to choose words from the lexis of academia and speak in more indirect manner when they are speaking in generalities:

- Throughtout the history of mankind, there have been many govening authoritics who claimed themselves to be democratic but still holds the absolute power.
• Historical examples of each are numerous, while examples of society in general without the direction of a government being tyrannical are unheard of.

The posts refer to “many” or “numerous” examples with which the reader is assumed to be so familiar that he or she can substitute specific names without any difficulty. These examples share a similar formal overtone, a combination of complex sentence structure with several subordinated clauses and formal vocabulary (mankind, authorities, numerous), both of which are characteristic of a formal, academic register concerned with abstract concepts and generalizations. In accordance with this more academic register, the writers of these examples adopt a more monologic stance rather than engaging directly with their readers. In the fluid online environment, both strategies are acceptable and neither is valued as better than the other. The students are free to draw on the discourses which best suit what they want to say. However, it is worth noting that when the students are discussing more abstract concepts, they adopt a more indirect and impersonal register, one which is often associated with formal, objective academic writing and their contributions lose the direct, personal quality which their instructors value. Which of these examples is more interesting: “But then, is social tyranny really inescapable?” or “examples of society in general without the direction of a government being tyrannical are unheard of”? You decide.

4.6 Incorporating evidence and developing an argument

4.6.1 Instructors’ perspectives

Before analyzing the students’ use of evidentials in their online posts, it is important to understand how they are viewed and evaluated from the instructors’ point of view.

The course consultant was adamant that one of the primary goals of the course overall was to get students thinking analytically, or “in terms of abstractions.” One of the goals of this particular online exercise, therefore, was to link specific examples to larger concepts and to identify the connections between them. He felt that this kind of analytical thinking would not just result in academic success in courses offered by the English department, but would contribute to their success in any academic discipline:

... I think that... they've learned something there... they're learning how to... think in terms of abstractions... to take an example and move to... to concepts... and that's great... that's great... that's valuable for students no matter what... discipline they choose

The TAs in the course agreed. Mark commented that:
using evidence is really important for any kind of writing you're going to do in the future, and quite often first year students have a hard time understanding how you're going to use the evidence. They just think it's there it'll help, which isn't really so true. I mean, just throwing quotations like so much buckshot at your essay isn't necessarily going to make it better. But if you can talk about that evidence, then that's... that's something that's a good skill to have.

The first thing the instructors looked for was the ability to identify the relevant passages that could support an argument. Rather than just “throwing quotations” at their essay, students needed to be able to identify the quotations that would best support their claims and to clearly situate the quotations in relation to their argument to establish their relevance. This requires a form of reading that goes beyond skimming the surface of a text. In other words, the ability to identify the relevant quotes and situate them in relation to an argument requires a level of close reading that is highly valued. All the instructors agreed that the ability to use textual evidence was proof that the students had “engaged with the text” on a deeper level:

my students were really engaging with the text and a lot of them were taking the quotes that they really needed to take... ah the only problem that I found, though, that students who were not doing so well or who are aware of the fact that they're not doing so well in other things... their postings just get longer instead of better.

It is not the ability to write longer passages that is prized; it is the ability to demonstrate that a student has read the text carefully and has thought about it. Not surprisingly, in a course in which students are encouraged to “resist orthodoxy” and to express their opinions, the ability to critique a text is highly valued. Julie commented that she looked for posts in which students had gone beyond a surface analysis of the text and had engaged with the text by “bringing their own take to bear” on it:

are they making sort of a superficial argument... one that... you know really on the surface of the text... or are they really... again sort of pulling apart the argument sort of looking at it... and even finding ways to... to contradict the authors that we're studying as opposed to just sort of saying... accepting the texts as they are.

4.6.2 Overview

I chose three representative posts for an analysis of the ways in which students incorporated citations into their texts and used evidentials to provide warranted evidence for their arguments. All three examples use citations from Mill, as using Mill's text to support a proposition was the original assignment. I was also interested in how the writers incorporated textual citations into their argument. In focusing on these examples, I was particularly concerned with:

1) How the writers constructed their arguments over several paragraphs
2) How the writers incorporated the textual citations  
3) Whether the writers evaluated the reliability of the evidence they used  
4) Whether in which the writers specified the mode of knowledge  
5) Ways in which the writers situated their position and established their argument in relation to the evidence

The English language uses a few clearly defined expressions such as “for example” and “for instance” to introduce evidence, but (unlike other languages) English has no specific lexical units or grammatical structures used solely to express evidentiality. Mary Barton (2004) cites Chafe’s (1986) functional definition: “everything dealt with under this broad interpretation of evidentiality involves attitudes towards knowledge.” Her analysis follows Chafe’s three general categories of evidentials. He includes words such as probably, certainly, generally, and virtually, under the category of words that evaluate the degree of reliability of knowledge. Words that specify the mode of knowledge include belief, induction, sensory evidence, and hearsay—a category which may not be used as evidence in a court of law, but which does include academic citations. Evidentials that situate knowledge as based on belief include I believe, I think, and in my opinion, while evidentials that include the line of reasoning include seem (inductive reasoning) and thus (deductive reasoning). Hearsay includes expressions such as it is known as well as specific citation. Evidentials used to mark the contrast between what Barton terms “knowledge and expectation” but I would term stance, and include of course, however, oddly enough, and other contrastive expressions or hedges that clearly establish the boundary between the content and the writer’s attitude or between established knowledge and the writer’s argument or contribution (Barton, 2004, p. 72). As Barton observes, we need to look closely at the words in context rather than just counting the number of words in order to divine the function of a word or expression. For example, clearly there is a difference between “He couldn’t see clearly” and “Clearly, he couldn’t see.”

Barton identified a pattern of differences in the use of evidentials when she compared in a corpus of essays by published writers and one by students. She noted that established academic writers use evidentials when problematizing previous knowledge, establishing an authorial identity, and referring to others’ work. She observed that established writers use evidentials to “point to their epistemological stance that knowledge is oppositional, the produce of contrast and competition,” establish their credentials, and emphasize critical perspectives while inexperienced writers use more neutral citation forms and use evidentials that construct knowledge as “the product of shared agreement” rather than “oppositional and specialized” (Barton, 2004, p. 73-74).
4.6.3 Three sample texts

I include the three texts in their entirety before breaking them down and analyzing them in table form. The first section of the table focuses on argument construction and the second section points out linguistic features (lexical choices and grammatical structures) that convey reliability of knowledge, mode of knowledge, and stance or to define a boundary between what is reported and the writer's argument.

Text 1:
Government can be a worse tyrant than society

"The time, it is to be hoped, is gone by, when any defence would be necessary of the 'liberty of the press' as one of the securities against corrupt or tyrannical government" (58)- sadly, dangerously, and most undemocratically, Mill's hopes have yet to be realized.

Using Mill's opening statement to chapter 2, we are given a very powerful and, in the 21st century US, a very controversial example of government's continued dominance, tyranny, and encouraged "mental despotism" (78). In modern societies, media, most specifically news print and television, are used as (arguably) the only forums for discussion, dissemination of knowledge, and debate. Yet, in the case of the US, it is well known that the media is almost exclusively controlled by a few very powerful, wealthy and politically connected individuals and families. What does this say for the pursuance of truth, a truth, which necessitates a "diversity of opinion" in order to give "fair play to all sides of the truth" (92). It is an example of what Mill later refers to as "the government, whether completely responsible to the people of not, [attempting] to control the expression of opinion" (58). In so doing, the government (as the arbitor of legality), acts to reinforce the social stigma, resulting in a further suppression of intellectual dissent and ideological opposition. As a result of "maintain[ing] all prevailing opinions outwardly undisturbed", such "intellectual pacification" acts as a "convenient plan for having peace in the intellectual world, and keeping all things going on therein very much as they do already" (76)- why would the wealthy and powerful want to change the status quo when they ahve nothing to benefit?

While "inquiring intellectuals find it advisable to keep the genuine principles and grounds of their convictions within their own breasts" (76), it is not the media conglomerates and high ranking politicians that face the loss, or privileged intellectual who have the training and time to make themselves aware of such intellectual tyranny, but rather "the greatest harm is done to those who are not heretics, and whose mental development is cramped, and their reason cowed, by the fear of heresy" (77), people who are thus forced to live in an "atmosphere of mental slavery" (78).

Yet as Mill further comments, it is not only intellectual creativity and inquiry that are stifled, but the very truths to which government and thus society (yes, top down. The media conglomerates have much to win by aligning themselves with governmental ideology, and equally much to lose ($$$) if it charts an independent course. Alternative media is not a cash crop) adhere become "dead dogma, not a living truth[s]" (79), with strong tendencies towards prejudice and potential falsehood (97). By engaging in intellectual tyranny (another powerful example previously mentioned was the Third Reich's Jewish policies), not only is political
balance unachievable, but as Mill argues, this leaves room for grave errors of judgement (resulting in the famous deaths of Socrates, Christ, etc.).

Thus, such a "quiet suppression of half of [the truth] is the formidable evil" (97). Instead of being the tyranny of the majority, it is the tyranny of the powerful, as exercised through the government. Using Mill's definition of liberty as "the protection against the tyranny of the political rulers" (43), it is thus fair to say that the US, as well as many other countries around the world to varying degrees, does not promote or possess intellectual (and thus full-scale, if any) liberty. Such intellectual tyranny not only creates conformists of citizens (as Orwell argued), but the intimate connection between the government and the mass media acts as the greatest tyranny of all by hindering unbiased knowledge, debate and societal change. The tyranny of society is a reaction to this fundamental and foundational intellectual tyranny as perpetrated by the government and capitalist interests.

Text 2:
I don’t think Mill actually says anything definite about one (society) is worse than the other (government) in his essay. Since I’m on the negative side, I’ll take the government side.
In page 45, Mill says “their power is ... nation’s power, concentrated, and in a form convenient for exercise.” Here, Mill is saying that the power of the government is considered as a nation’s power (which represents the power of all the people in a society). And it is in a concentrated and convenient form so it can be used effectively against whatever it desires. Hence, it's much more convenient for the government compare to the society to turn into a tyrant.
In page 46, Mill says “like other tyrannies, the tyranny of the majority.... is chiefly operating through the acts of the public authorities.” Here, Mill is saying that the tyranny of the majority (which comes from the society) has to operate through a public authority (which is the government) to have an impact on the people.
In page 58, Mill says “ the time, it is to be hoped, is gone by, when any defence would be necessary of the “liberty of the press” as one of the securities against corrupt or tyrannical government”. Here, Mill seems to be saying that one of the ways a government can control society is by limiting the freedom of the press.
Thus, the government can control both the physical aspects of a society as well as the mental and spiritual aspects of a society (hence, a much worse tyrant than a society).
I’m getting tired of finding quotes from the text. Mill makes plenty of reference on the spiritual stuff.

Text 3:
Tyrant refers to a ruler who uses power in a harsh, demanding or oppressive way and holds absolute power. In most cases, tyrant is used to describe a despotic government who uses great power to deprive others’ interests unjustly or cruelly. But in fact, society can also be a worse tyrant than government in some ways. Society is a collective community composed of abundant people and such great numbers of separate individuals can execute its own mandates (46).
Unfortunately, people’s acts are always controlled by social opinion and interference. Society can form its own custom and this custom can penetrate deeply into each member of the community because people living in a certain society are difficult to avoid from the influence of its custom. Custom is a kind of things that people are accustomed to believe without skepticism (47). Society compels people to conform to its notions of personal, as of social excellence (55). People are spontaneously to follow all social opinion and diminish their own opinions as well as the expression of their own opinions.
There are some authorities in a society and they all oppress the room for expressing individual’s opinion. For instance, Roman Catholic Church is served as one of the authorities and it is sovereign (64-5). All religious beliefs are infallible that they are warranted to be absolute truth and no one can challenge its truth. It means that there are no free discussion of all beliefs and people only can do are to believe them and conform to these rules. Deprivations of one’s opinion, an expression of one’s opinion and a chance of free discussion on a matter are all the symbols of tyranny. Therefore, society can also be a tyrant over individuals because society deprives individuals’ freedom of opinion and discussion.

These texts show how different writers constructed their arguments over several paragraphs. The first text used Mill’s text very effectively to support an argument, while the second, which is representative of the majority of student posts, did so to a lesser degree, and the third included quotes from Mill without situating them or clearly establishing their relevance to the argument. These three examples demonstrate the wide range of student responses and the varying ways in which students engaged with Mill’s text when framing their arguments. Some of the specific discursive strategies employed in these examples will be examined in more detail in other student postings as representative of the types of discursive strategies the students employed.

Rather than analyzing the posts at the end, I have divided them into sections and put the analysis and comments which draw attention to specific features of the post alongside the post. As the first post is considerably longer than the second and third, I have taken excerpts from it to focus on specific features in order to keep the analysis focused and the comparison between the three posts relatively easy to follow.

Subject: Re: Negative Team

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Development of argument</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;The time, it is to be hoped, is gone by, when any defence would be necessary of the 'liberty of the press' as one of the securities against corrupt or tyrannical government&quot; (58) - sadly, dangerously, and most undemocratically, Mill's hopes have yet to be realized.</td>
<td>The post, like many of the student posts in this section, commences with a quote from Mill and the relevant page number. The author then takes a clear stand using strong adverbials to make a strong—yet indirect—statement of opinion. Her position is conveyed through adverbs and adverbials throughout the post although there is no subjective “I” which speaks directly. The last sentence Use of adverbials to establish the author’s stance (sadly, dangerously)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using Mill's opening statement to chapter 2, **we are given** a very powerful and, in the 21st century US, a very controversial example of government's continued dominance, tyranny, and encouraged "mental despotism" (78). In modern societies, media, most specifically news print and television, **are used as (arguably)** the only forums for discussion, dissemination of knowledge, and debate. Yet, in the case of the US, it is well known that the media is almost exclusively controlled by a few very powerful, wealthy and politically connected individuals and families. **What does this say** for the pursuance of truth, a truth which necessitates a "diversity of opinion" in order to give "fair play to all sides of the truth" (92). **It is an example** of what Mill later refers to as "the government, whether completely responsible to the people of not, [attempting] to control the expression of opinion" (58). In so doing, the government (as the arbitor of legality), acts to reinforce the social stigma, resulting in a further suppression of intellectual dissent and ideological opposition. As a result of "maintain[ing] all prevailing opinions outwardly undisturbed", such "intellectual pacification" acts as a "convenient plan for having peace in the intellectual world, is in the passive voice. "Mill’s hopes" are the subject of the sentence, giving them primary importance and connecting back to the quote with which this short paragraph began.

The first sentence clearly connects the introductory quote to the evidence, the "example," "we are given." The use of "we" aligns author and readers, who are the objects "given" the example. The passive voice is used again to position the readers and writer as passive recipients of the action, reflecting the argument itself, which is that we are passive recipients of the media, which, in turn, is a passive tool of the few "wealthy and politically connected individuals and families" who control it. The argument is modified somewhat by the use of "arguably" which is bracketed as a slight hedge to the author’s strongly worded statement of opinion. The passive is used again in the evidence for the argument, where the author appeals to general knowledge rather than specific sources and evades defining who knows about the true ownership of the media and how these facts are “known.” The author then uses a rhetorical question to open up the subject to discussion rather than make further statements. She carefully interweaves Mill’s words into her sentence in order to demonstrate that she has read the text carefully.

**Mode of knowledge:** an example from common knowledge of the example “given” to us. We are positioned as recipients not as active constructors of knowledge. The word "controversial" problematizes the **reliability** of knowledge, suggesting that it is common knowledge for us, but may not be for others. This knowledge is not established, but is contested. "it is well known that" also established the **mode** of knowledge as common knowledge, but again, knowledge which is passively received rather than actively constructed.

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/111
and keeping all things going on therein very much as they do already" (76)- why would the wealthy and powerful want to change the status quo when they ahve nothing to benefit?

This post is a long one, and well chosen citations from Mill are continually interwoven with the author's text to support and validate her argument. Her purpose in writing is twofold: in arguing that the "tyranny of government is worse than the tyranny of society," she uses governmental control of the media as her primary evidence. The citations are not "scattered like buckshot" throughout the post but are carefully chosen for their relevance to the writer's argument about the state of the press in contemporary America. The writer has satisfied the instructors' requirement to demonstrate her comprehension of Mill and "take the quotes" she "needed to take." Mill's quotes lend authority and conviction to the writer's argument. Although the subjective "I" never appears in the post, the writer conveys her stance through the use of strong adverbials (powerful, controversial). Her claims are grounded in common knowledge (it is well known) and the well chosen citations appropriated from Mill. Her text demonstrates that she has read Mill with attention and recognized the validity of his argument when applied to a current situation. By appropriating Mill, she has infused her argument with his forceful voice, adding resonance and power to her words. Although the post is structured along the assignment guidelines and uses both Mill's text and a contemporary example to
support the proposition, the post reads more like an argument about the control of the media which is supported by textual evidence from Mill.

I use the word “appropriate” deliberately, drawing upon Bakhtin’s notion of “appropriation.” Although in many contexts, the word “appropriation” may have negative connotations, suggesting that something has been taken without permission or by force, in Bakhtin’s view, appropriation was a positive and natural way in which speakers used language and made it their own.

In Bakhtin’s view, the relationship between the “word” and the object or concept to which it referred was not a static act of identification. As Bakhtin envisioned it, “no living word relates to an object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that it is often difficult to penetrate” The act of speaking takes place, for Bakhtin, in “the process of living interaction with this specific environment” in which “the word may be individualized and given stylistic shape” (Bakhtin, 1980, p.293).

No word, therefore, is endowed with arbitrary meaning. Rather, it is imbued with layers of meaning acquired through its repeated use over time, through the other words with which it is associated, and in the act of speaking is “individualized and given stylistic shape” by the context, in which a speaker uses it, the purpose for which it is used by a particular speaker, and the way in which it is understood by the listener. For Bakhtin, the utterance, which he defined as the act of giving thought a voice, was not a solitary act; it was in the dialogic process in of utterance and response that the word took form. While acquiring new significance in the dialogic interaction, the word also carried with it traces of the “elastic environment” of historical, cultural, and situational contexts in which it had been used before:

Language, for the individual consciousness, lies in the divide between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his intention, with his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting to his own expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not after all out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one’s own . . . Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions. Bakhtin (1981, pp 293-294)

Drawing on Bakhtin’s concept of appropriation, Olga Dysthe proposes that “an important part of learning is ‘to appropriate the word’, to understand and make the thoughts of others our own.” We do this through interaction with written texts and with
others’ “interpretations and appropriations” (2002, p. 351) of them. In using Mill’s text as
evidence, the writer has indeed “populated” Mill’s words with her intentions,
appropriating them and “adapting” them to her own “semantic and expressive intention,”
and thereby making them her own. Furthermore, she has used Mill’s text as a “thinking
device,” (Dysthe, 2002), entering into dialogue with Mill, and generating new meanings
and new knowledge through her own dialogic text. Through dialogue with Mill’s text, she
has engaged epistemically with Mill, as Gordon Wells would term it, and Mill’s text has
not only served as a springboard for her own thinking, but has proved itself “bon à
penser.”

We are now in a position to recognize the significance of this Bakhtinian notion of
dialogue and appropriation in relation to the academic genre. Academic writing is, first,
and foremost, an ongoing conversation in which ideas are put forth, restated, elaborated,
clarified, or debated. Academics are in continual dialogue, reframing ideas and
negotiating meanings. Appropriation in the Bakhtinian sense of the word is a
fundamental part of the ways in which the academic genre has evolved. We appropriate
insights and knowledge from the work of others, acknowledging them while at the same
time transforming them in accordance with our needs and within the contextual
affordances and constraints of our particular situation. The academic genre, a world in
which language is paramount and in which all language carries a history of meanings
negotiated and transformed through dialogic interaction can be seen therefore, as the
exemplar of Bakhtin’s “elastic environment” in which the word is given breath through “a
process of living interaction.”

The first post concludes with a summary and restatement of the position stated in
the first paragraph:

| Such intellectual tyranny not only creates conformists of citizens (as Orwell argued), but the intimate connection between the government and the mass media acts as the greatest tyranny of all by hindering unbiased knowledge, debate and societal change. The tyranny of society is a reaction to this fundamental and foundational intellectual tyranny as perpetrated by the government and capitalist interests. | Here, the author addresses the original question by reframing the notion of “tyranny” in the original proposition as “intellectual tyranny” to which the “tyranny of society” (the tyranny in the original proposition) is secondary, framed as a “reaction” to the much more threatening one “perpetrated” by the government. The word “tyranny,” which is repeated in each sentence with a different adjective (intellectual tyranny/ greatest tyranny/ tyranny of... | Orwell is used as another evidential here

Lexical choices indicate the writer’s strong feelings and stance
greatest tyranny
Hindering unbiased knowledge
fundamental foundational intellectual tyranny perpetrated by |
In the second example, the student interprets the task differently. The argument is also structured differently, and the student incorporates evidentials in a different manner.

**Message no. 5394 [Reply of: no. 5229]**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td>I don’t think Mill actually says anything definite about one (society) is worse than the other (government) in his essay. <strong>Since I’m on the negative side, I’ll take the government side.</strong></td>
<td>The writer’s first sentence is correct but phrased as “I don’t think” rather than a direct statement, thereby softening the assertion. She goes on to say that she’ll “take” the side she has been placed on. This verb implies both that she will adopt and accept this side as it has been given to her. She does not use strong verbs such as argue, etc. and does not clearly state a position.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The writer states her “side” rather than stating what her argument is. “I’ll take” may convey some resentment that the student was not allowed to choose a side but rather put on the negative side. It should be noted that in the interviews, some students commented that they would have preferred to argue a position they actually supported rather than be told which position to adopt. However, as discussed in previous sections, the instructors had a well thought out rationale for adopting this approach.</td>
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In page 45, Mill says “their power is ... nation’s power, concentrated, and in a form convenient for exercise.” Here, Mill is saying that the power of the government is considered as a nation’s power (which represents the power of all the people in a society). And it is in a concentrated and convenient form so it can be used effectively against whatever it desires. Hence, it’s much more convenient for the government compare to the society to turn into a tyrant.

The post begins, as the majority of posts in this module do, with a citation from Mill and the page number. It then paraphrases Mill’s statement. The conjunction “and” is used to link the two ideas. Notice that the student’s paraphrase uses the same words that Mill does. The pronoun “it” seems to switch reference from power to the government, obfuscating the connection between ideas to some extent. The writer cites Mill using a neutral reporting verb, say and then paraphrases Mill using the same reporting verb.

No markers of stance are used to establish writer’s own position.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>In page 46, Mill says “like other tyrannies, the tyranny of the majority... is chiefly operating through the acts of the public authorities.” Here, Mill is saying that the tyranny of the majority (which comes from the society) has to operate through a public authority (which is the government) to have an impact on the people.</th>
<th>The use of “hence” signals the conclusion. The exact same pattern is used here, with the same reporting verb and a paraphrase which uses the same terms as Mill does. No connection is drawn between the two citations from Mill. The verb “say” is repeated twice again. There is no indication as to the writer’s stance or the reliability of the knowledge. It has simply been taken from Mill and repeated here.</th>
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<td>In page 58, Mill says “the time, it is to be hoped, is gone by, when any defence would be necessary of the “liberty of the press” as one of the securities against corrupt or tyrannical government”. Here, Mill seems to be saying that one of the ways a government can control society is by limiting the freedom of the press. Thus, the government can control both the physical aspects of a society as well as the mental and spiritual aspects of a society (hence, a much worse tyrant than a society).</td>
<td>Two conjunctions “thus” and “hence” are used to signal that she has drawn a conclusion from the above paraphrase. She restates the citations as referring to the “mental and spiritual aspects of a society.” She uses the conjunction “thus” to signal that she has come to a conclusion. The same pattern recurs again, but the author hedges her paraphrase by using “seems to be saying” rather than a direct reporting verb “says” or “is saying.”</td>
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</table>

This post cites Mill several times as does the first post, but without weaving Mill’s text into the writer’s argument. The argument is stated in the final sentence, “Thus, the government can control both the physical aspects of a society as well as the mental and spiritual aspects of a society.” Once we read backward, the connection between the quotes the writer has chosen become clear. Without clearly explaining the reason why certain quotes were chosen, the writer gives the impression that she has chosen them at random and simply “scattered” them in her own writing. This impression is supported by the final “I” statement. If the writer had clearly stated her argument at the beginning...
and established the connection between each citation and the argument, she would have
given the impression that she had engaged with the text and established a stronger
authorial voice. Once the argument is clear, we realize that the writer has indeed taken
the quotes she needed to take from the text, but the way she has structured the text
gives precisely the opposite impression. The final sentence suggests that the writer
interpreted the assignment as primarily to find quotes from the text, and, rather
unfortunately, conveys the writer's feeling that the assignment was undertaken
mechanically.

The third post begins with a definition of terms, a strategy commonly used in this
section of the posts. As noted previously, this was a common social practice with which
the students were familiar in the online materials and in their discussion sections, where
instructors often returned to key terms or asked the students how an author would
define certain words.

<table>
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<td>Tyrant’ refers to a ruler who uses power in a harsh, demanding or oppressive way and holds absolute power. <strong>In most cases,</strong> tyrant is used to describe a despotic government who uses great power to deprive others’ interests unjustly or cruelly.</td>
<td>The student begins by defining the terminology she will use.</td>
<td>The writer makes a generalization to appeal to common knowledge. The mode of knowledge is most likely a dictionary, but the writer has included a specific example to ensure that readers understand what she means by the term.</td>
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<tr>
<td>But in fact, society can also be a worse tyrant than government in some ways. Society is a collective community composed of abundant people and such great numbers of separate individuals can execute its own mandates (46).</td>
<td>The conjunction “but” signals the turn in the argument to the opposite side. This is followed by another generalization that is taken from Mill (signaled by the page number) although without quotation marks, it is difficult to identify exactly which words have been appropriated.</td>
<td>The writer uses a generalized hedging statement “in some ways.”</td>
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<td><strong>Unfortunately,</strong> people’s acts are <strong>always</strong> controlled by social opinion and</td>
<td>Again, the writer has appropriated ideas from Mill and signaled this with a page</td>
<td>Two strong adverbials are used here, “unfortunately,” and</td>
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interference. Society can form its own custom and this custom can penetrate deeply into each member of the community because people living in a certain society are difficult to avoid from the influence of its custom.

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<th>interference. Society can form its own custom and this custom can penetrate deeply into each member of the community because people living in a certain society are difficult to avoid from the influence of its custom.</th>
<th>number reference, but no conjunctions have been used to show identify how Mill's ideas are related to the assertion in the first sentence.</th>
<th>“always,” which give us an idea of the writer's stance.</th>
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Custom is a kind of things that people are accustomed to believe without skepticism (47). Society compels people to conform to its notions of personal, as of social excellence (55). People are spontaneously to follow all social opinion and diminish their own opinions as well as the expression of their own opinions.

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<th>Custom is a kind of things that people are accustomed to believe without skepticism (47). Society compels people to conform to its notions of personal, as of social excellence (55). People are spontaneously to follow all social opinion and diminish their own opinions as well as the expression of their own opinions.</th>
<th>Again, the writer has defined her terms with a reference to Mill. This is followed by another sentence from Mill. These sentences read as if partly written by Mill and partly written by the student, but the citations have not been clearly identified. No conjunctions have been used to guide the reader or establish clear connections between the ideas. The subject is clearly identified at the beginning of each sentence: “custom is”; “society compels”; and “people are,” linking these concepts to the verbs “accustomed to,” “compel” and “follow,” but the idea is not clearly stated. The last sentence appears to explicate the preceding one.</th>
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There are some authorities in a society and they all oppress the room for expressing individual’s opinion. For instance, Roman Catholic Church is served as one of the authorities and it is sovereign (64-5). All religious beliefs are infallible that they are warranted to be absolute truth and no one can challenge its truth.

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<th>Reference is made to a general authority, followed by an example which Mill uses. This is followed by an overgeneralized statement in which the words “infallible” and “warranted” have been placed. These words were probably taken from Mill’s text and were used to give the post an authoritative flavour.</th>
<th>The statement “There are some authorities in a society and they all oppress the room for expressing individual’s opinion” is problematic as ‘some’ and ‘all’ do not agree. The evidence is an example taken from Mill’s text, which is assumed to be a reliable source.</th>
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It means that there are no free discussion of all beliefs and people only can do are to believe them and conform to these rules. Deprivations of one’s opinion, an

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<th>Again, the writer explicates the previous statement using “it means” to connect the topic of the two paragraphs. She also uses a conjunction to signal a conclusion. The writer moves from using “people” as a general subject to using “one” as a general subject. This is an impersonal</th>
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There are some authorities in a society and they all oppress the room for expressing individual’s opinion.
expression of one's opinion and a chance of free discussion on a matter are all the symbols of tyranny. Therefore, society can also be a tyrant over individuals because society deprives individuals' freedom of opinion and discussion.

use of "therefore" indicates that a cause and effect relationship has been established. Because few conjunctions or other devices were used to link the ideas in the previous parts of the post, and because the citations from Mill's text seem randomly chosen because they have not been woven into the text as in the first example or explicated in detail as in the second, the conclusion rings false even though, upon review of the text, it is clear that the writer has presented the argument systematically.

subject. This choice might reflect the writer's desire to establish a more impersonal, "academic" tone.

These three examples demonstrate the range of ability in this group of students. Although all the students have satisfied the requirement to use Mill's text to support their argument, the first text has incorporated well-chosen and appropriate citations from Mill to support and argue a position. The second text, while it also incorporates Mill, and, in fact, includes well chosen citations, does not clearly establish the connection between the argument and the support until the end of the text, giving the impression that the writer did not read Mill's text with care. The third text also incorporates citations from Mill but does not clearly establish the connection between them.

Two types of evidentials are used in these texts: citations from Mill and references to common knowledge or definitions. When drawing upon Mill, the writers appeal to shared agreement regarding Mill's views. Similarly, by appealing to common knowledge, they assume shared views. The first text is the only text that establishes an "oppositional" stance through the use of adverbials as professional academic writers do and the only text in which the writer overtly positions herself with respect to the content through adverbials.

4.7 Incorporating Online Evidence
Besides incorporating evidence from Mill's text or other texts that they had read during the course, the students incorporated evidence that was considered to be common knowledge (Nazism, Hitler, Stalin, Iraq). Because this evidence was assumed to be common knowledge, the students did not explicate at length. When using evidentials drawn from common knowledge, they constructed knowledge as "the product of shared agreement" rather than "oppositional and specialized" (Barton, 2004), and this is
reflected in the use of inclusive pronouns like "we," "our" and "let's." When incorporating evidence from their background knowledge that may not have been familiar to others, many students included a link to a website for more information, further grounding their arguments by referring to an outside source where the information could be verified. In interviews, they commented that one of the advantages of online posting was being able to quickly find and incorporate references and that this made them feel more secure:

I like that I have the time to sit down and actually like provide . . . more evidence from like other sources . . . like online sources like you can just . . . you know copy and paste . . . like a link to some site instead of having to ... type it all out and then . . . you know that way you can get more information in there and . . . and just like feel more sure about ... like your argument instead of just saying whatever comes into your head like in class

Evidentials from other sources were incorporated in different ways. One student addressed the readers directly:

Please refer to this website on Tiananmen square massacre if anyone is interested in this event. http://www.christusrex.org/wwwl/sdc/tiananmen.html

The post, which was included in previous discussions, addresses the readers directly by asking them to pay attention to the example, "I want everyone to pay attention to the Tiananmen massacre which happened in China at the year of 1989." It goes on to paraphrase the information from the website and clearly establishes the writer's stance:

In my perspective, no matter how much the majority (the society) had contributed into making their country more liberal, I doubted their efforts

The post concludes with a direct address to the reader and offers the website address for those who are interested in more information.

Another student used the French revolution as an example. She began by introducing the 'Reign of Terror':

During the height of the French Revolution, the period known as 'Reign of Terror' occurred.

After a description of the events copied directly from the website, she included the website address without an invitation to look there for more information as in the first post: www.wikipedia.com "Reign of Terror"

The same post contains another hyperlink to the wikipedia.com website. The writer introduces her information as extra research on her part:
I went through a historical timeline and a ‘society’ that has embarked on ‘genocide’ is the French during the Revolution.

She then pastes the information from the wikipedia website directly into her post and concludes with the hyperlink to show where the information came from:

The poor at the lower stratums of French society were being feudally oppressed and starved by the monstrous and exclusive privileges of the French Aristocracy and Royalty. Taking up arms, they embarked on ‘genocide’ of the upper Bourgeoisie classes to establish “Liberty and Justice”. Either through political and executions, the revolution was a success. www.wikipedia.com “French Revolution

Like the writers in texts 2 and 3 analyzed previously, this writer makes little attempt to incorporate the information as part of an argument. She gives the impression that including information taken from the internet counts as “extra research” and does not select the relevant passages that would best illustrate her proposition but rather incorporates large sections of the website material.

Another writer discussed Mill’s text in relation to apartheid in South Africa. She also used citations from a website, but wove them into her own text, and incorporated the website address as an in-text citation. She carefully situated the evidence in relation to the proposition at the beginning of her post:

an example where the government is the worse tyrant than society even though it does not represent the society is South Africa and the Apartheid policy regime

She continued by giving some statistics on apartheid, and then included the citation from her reference:

The government used the “law” as a tool to maintain its position, such as through the Public Safety Act and the Criminal Law Amendment Act in 1953, which “empowered the government to declare stringent states of emergency and increased penalties for protesting against or supporting the repeal of a law.” (http://www-cs-students.stanford.edu/~cale/cs201/apartheid.hist.html)

The citation from the website is woven into the student’s text, and the reference is also woven in as an in-text citation. This post uses an essay format rather than the more conversational format of the first post (“please refer”) or the second (“I went through”), and appropriates the evidence to support the writer’s argument. The writer concludes by synthesizing the information with a quote from Mill.

The government has the power and tools which is “concentrated, and in a form convenient for exercise,” (45) which allows for a more effective way to act tyrant than society.
The writer has recognized the connection between Mill's text and a current example. Like the writer in the first example, she has been able to incorporate evidence drawn from her background knowledge and interests to support her argument, and, like the writer who argued about freedom of the press, to incorporate Mill's text into another type of evidence. Although the writer obviously knows enough about apartheid to discuss it in reference to Mill without including a citation, she has chosen to do so, most likely because, as the students observed in interviews, "you can get more information in there and . . . and just like feel more sure about ... like your argument instead of just saying whatever comes into your head like in class."

This comment is interesting because the online environment is one in which it is possible to say "whatever comes into your head like in class" and at the same time to find and include verifiable sources "just like feel more sure about" what you've said. It is easier to find and incorporate evidentials in an environment where connections have become "a click away," and this practice became increasingly common as the term progressed.

As we have seen, students used a variety of approaches when incorporating and referring to evidence to support their arguments. The students were aware that they needed to incorporate and refer to textual evidence to support their arguments, and the majority of them did so in their posts in this section. However, as we have seen, some students did so more successfully than others. While some students were able to select and appropriate the citations they needed and to incorporate them into their argument, others spoke in general terms and simply lifted citations from the reference without appropriating it effectively. The range of responses in this section shows that using evidence effectively is challenging, but students recognize the need to "make their argument secure" by incorporating them.

As these posts were not meant to be read as formal academic papers in which sources are used to situate the writer in relation to an established discipline or to contest established knowledge, we would not expect to find evidentials used in this way. Interestingly, we do find evidentials used to "guide the reader's interpretation" of the text and "establish an authorial command of the subject" in the examples cited.

The writers of these posts have also employed a wide range of discursive strategies when drawing on evidence. As previously noted, many students used inclusive pronouns such as "we" and "our" to create a sense of affiliation between writer and reader, drawing upon shared knowledge and common experiences to support their arguments. This practice reflected the students' awareness of an audience for their writing and an overt acknowledgement that their contributions were being read. Other
students spoke in more vague, general terms rather than drawing on specific examples. Many included examples drawn from their particular background knowledge and interests, sometimes including hyperlinks to websites with further information, something which made them feel more "secure" about incorporating this kind of evidence. Such practices are easily adopted in the online environment where information is easy to find and easy to incorporate into a text, and the online environment, in fact, facilitates certain literacy practices which we see in this online community.

The online environment is, in many ways, a highly paradoxical one. It is a dialogic environment, yet one in which the dialogue is not situated within a clearly established surrounding context upon which interlocutors draw to interpret one another. It is an environment in which communication has many of the characteristics of the spoken word: messages can be composed fluently, sentences are often short and simple, and much of the discourse has the dialogic overtones of conversation. Yet, at the same time, it is an environment in which communication takes place through the written word: thoughts must be fully formulated in sentences, lexical choices range from an informal to highly formal academic lexis, sometimes in the same post, ideas are fully explicated rather than communicated in verbal shorthand, and hyperlinks are incorporated into texts as in-text citations. It is a hybrid environment, a mixture of spoken and written discourse, and many of the observations we have already made about the discourse in this online community reflect that hybrid quality.

In this chapter, we have focused on the ways that students incorporate evidence into their writing, including the kind of evidence, they employ, the discourses they draw upon, and the texts that they use. In the next chapter, we will return to the notion of "speaking out," looking again at who can speak, what can be said, and how it can be said in order to understand how topic, language, and audience are negotiated through the act of composition.
Chapter 5
Speaking up
5.1: Sharing “things I’ve figured out”

Since the course was first implemented in a mixed-mode fashion, the course coordinator, consultant, and the instructors noticed a significant difference between the students’ online writing and their more formal academic assignments. The website was deliberately structured to give students as many opportunities as possible to “say something they actually want to communicate to others,” which, as the course coordinator observed, “is the key to good writing.” He felt that it was important to “encourage students to express themselves in essay writing and exam writing rather in the way that they do... in postings” and that over the term, the instructors observed “a transference from the posting experience to... essay writing and examination writing experience” which represented “the more striking improvement” in the students’ writing ability. The course consultant agreed:

we found that the students... generally wrote... better... their ideas were crisper... clearer when they... were not writing formal papers... when they could... when they didn’t take on the student persona they could... speak as... themselves in an... environment that they were familiar with...

Many of the students interviewed posted more than once a week, and often differentiated between posting for the discussion section and voluntary posting. One student commented that she often posted twice: one post to respond to the question of the week and another one “that’s a couple of lines that are just like questions or interesting things I’ve figured out.” These asides were often “like off side of the topic... where I want to share with people... or just I find something interesting,” and were often followed with a hyperlink for readers to click on if they wanted more information.

These optional posts were spaces in which the students felt they could share things which may not have been “on topic,” but may have been of interest to others. Several students commented that they liked the fact that they could “contribute from what they know,” something which made the online discussion much more interesting for them and gave them incentive to post more than once a week. They described these more optional posts as spaces

where people contribute from what they know... that also... makes it interesting that you hear... things you don't expect to hear... that somebody contributes something different

By contributing from “what they know,” students contribute viewpoints evidence that may be unexpected, but are often intriguing to others. As the website structure
encourages contribution from students and encourages them to offer their views and share their knowledge, it is not surprising that many posts, both in the discussion sections and in other parts of the website, make reference to knowledge drawn from diverse disciplines. In the first Mill module, some examples of current or historical examples of the tyranny of government were used by many students to support their proposition (Nazism, Stalin, the war in Iraq), over half the students who used specific examples chose unusual examples which were not found in Mill or drawn from immediately obvious common knowledge; for example, de Toqueville, the War Measures Act, the Japanese invasion of China, the suppression of religion in Communist countries, Vietnamese boat people, arranged marriage in Korea, the President of Egypt, a case of bullying which had been in the newspaper, and the gothic lifestyle. Encouragement to support and validate arguments by reference to what they know validates the students' "autobiographical identities" and gives them confidence, thereby facilitating integration between autobiographical self, authorial self and discoursal self in their writing. When presenting information which they know well and want to share with others, students are much more likely to adopt an authoritative stance by addressing their readers directly as an authoritative "I." In the following example, which has been discussed before, the writer conveys information which has great significance for her, motivating her to speak out and to communicate something of great importance which others may not know. The writer addresses the audience forcefully and directly with a demand to "pay attention" to her personal example of the tyranny of government:

I want everyone to pay attention to the Tiananmen massacre which happened in China at the year of 1989. A group of students, who supported democracy and demanded for freedom of speech in China, had been killed by tanks and soldiers under the request of the communist government of China. After this event, the communist government of China had been judged as "tyrant" and had brought the world's attention to the political condition of China. In my perspective, no matter how much the majority (the society) had contributed into making their country more liberal, I doubted their efforts because the government is the only power to influence a society. Please refer to this website on Tiananmen square massacre if anyone is interested in this event.
http://www.christusrex.org/www1/sdc/tiananmen.html

This post is interesting in that, not only does the writer (who rarely speaks out so directly in other modules) directly and unequivocally state her position on the argument and support it with a link to a website with more information, but she explicitly commands the readers to "pay attention" to her example. She adopts an authoritative stance, claiming the right to speak and to be heard with attention, most likely because the Tiananmen Square massacre is a topic with strong personal relevance to her, one
which she is now able to situate in a global context through her reading of Mill while at the same time her understanding of the event validates her interpretation of Mill’s text.

Another student used the example of the Japanese invasion of China to illustrate Mill’s argument regarding the necessity of minority opinions:

... he argues that the necessaries of minority opinions. To make my argument sound, let’s think of an example. When in 1940’s when Japanese Army invaded China, they controlled some area and setup a so called “self-government”, like Mill says “the 'self-government' spoken of is not the government of each by himself, but of each by all the rest” (Page 46 Mill). As a government set up by invaders and represented only the interest of invaders, the government was totally unjustified and was a fascism government. However, even in such a dictatorial government, resistances existed. The reason for that is the government’s power is so weak comparing to the society. Those anti-Japanese warriors won’t survive without the support of the society. Even if the government want to arrest or kill those warriors, the society can protect them. Think if the society not supports them. And the society keeps on telling everyone that the Japanese’s governances are justified. Will there still be so many resistances? Society’s power is always greater than the government, since the society represents all of the people, but the government only either majority (in the case of democracy government) or minority (in the case of dictatorial government). Thus when the society turns to be a tyrant, it will be even worse.

The writer obviously has strong feelings about this example, and it is one that has great personal meaning for him. He is able to connect to Mill’s abstract notions through his background knowledge about Chinese resistance during the Japanese occupation of China, and he frames his contribution as evidence that supports and illustrates Mill’s ideas rather than simply as a personal account that may or may not be of interest to others. Throughout the post, he employs an academic lexis drawn from political science (unjustified, fascism, dictatorial, resistance) which is used correctly even if the word forms are incorrect. He addresses his readers directly twice using imperatives: “let’s think of an example,” and “Think if the society not supports them,” as well as with a question: “Will there still be so many resistances?” Here we see the writer drawing on the discourses with which he is familiar while at the same time using an academic lexis to convey his strong feelings about the injustices which occurred during the occupation period, integrating his knowledge of Chinese history into his evolving understanding of Mill’s text and establishing a confident authorial self who proclaims: “Society’s power is always greater than the government” and predicts “Thus when the society turns to be a tyrant, it will be even worse.”

Through participation in online discussion, not only do the students have the opportunity to “share what they know” with others, but also to share information that is of personal importance to them. In these examples, both writers have taken a direct,
authoritative stance more akin to the authoritative stance established academic writers take in published writings than in typical writing from undergraduate students (Hyland, 2002). With the opportunity to “say something” they actually want “to communicate to others,” these writers “speak as themselves,” yet at the same time integrate the discourses and knowledge with which they are familiar into the academic format which they are gradually appropriating through engagement in online discussion. This is one of the major advantages of online communication. In the online environment, students are free to draw upon a wide range of discourses and texts and to integrate and appropriate them in ways that are comfortable, incorporating the familiar discourses into the unfamiliar discourse of academia in ways which are authentic, enabling them to speak as themselves rather than adopting a false academic persona and to speak authoritatively by sharing what they know with others.

I would suggest that providing an environment in which students are able to incorporate familiar literacy practices (e-mail, internet chat, instant messaging, etc) and the “rich stew” of discourses which student writers are already familiar (Ivanic, 1998, p. 85) into their evolving understanding and mastery of the academic literacy practices is one of the primary reasons for the noticeable improvement in the students’ academic writing as the course progresses. By finding ways to connect the students’ personal knowledge, expertise, and experience to the themes and issues in the course texts, the instructors and course creators encourage students to integrate their autobiographical selves and the and the familiar discourses which they bring to their writing into their evolving understanding and mastery of academic writing. Furthermore, by validating what the students know and who they are, the course positions the students as “legitimate speakers,” to use Bourdieu’s terminology, speakers whose voices deserve to be heard and whose views deserve recognition.

5.2 Online discourse

As the course consultant observed, the online environment is familiar to students. They are used to communicating with others through email, text messages, internet chat, instant messaging, and the plethora of online discussion boards and listservs available for people with similar interests. Online discourse, as Harasim (1990, 2000), Abdullah (1998) and Yates (1996) have observed, is more informal than academic writing, a mixture of spoken and written discourse. Yates’s (1996) large corpus-based comparison between CMC, spoken, and written discourse identified several specific features of the discourse of computer-mediated communication. While the range of vocabulary and lexical density (the ratio of lexical items to grammatical items in a
sample) of the discourse used in CMC is more akin to written than spoken English, the
use of pronouns is more akin to speech than writing. Previous linguistic studies that
compared spoken and written discourse theorized that "removal of the pronoun
associated with personal speech" in written discourse reflected the "impersonal,
generalizing tone of newspapers, textbooks, scientific articles" (Fowler & Kress, 1979,
cited in Yates, 1998, p. 40). Yates found that "despite its similarity to writing in terms of
overall frequency of pronoun use, CMC is quite different from writing in how pronouns of
each type are distributed" (Yates, 1996, p. 41), and, in fact, CMC makes more use of
both the first and second person pronouns than either speech or writing. Computer-
mediated communication, therefore, can be viewed as a hybrid of spoken and written
discourse. Writers/speakers do not interact directly with their readers/listeners, but at
the same time they write as if engaged dialogue, anticipating a response and carefully
interpolating their reader into their writing through the use of pronouns. As we have
observed in the online data from this study, writers also employ sentence structures
characteristic of spoken discourse in CMC, including imperatives, inclusive imperatives,
and questions more often in online discourse than in formal writing.

Yates concluded that in CMC, where there is no field or larger context within which
the interaction is situated, "the text of the CMC interaction is the field." If this is true,
then the text itself is charged with a heavy burden. Unlike a conversation, which is
carried out in a specific social situation to which the interlocutors refer and upon which
they draw to achieve mutual understanding, an online exchange is removed from the
social context which establishes the participants' roles, permissible subjects of
conversation, and acceptable ways of speaking about them. As Yates frames it, the field
carries the "social situation," as well as the "participants' relationship to the situation,
their perception of the relationships between the knowledge and objects under
discussion" (Yates, 1996, pp. 45-46). As we know from participation in an online
community, whether a listserv, bulletin board, or any other kind of group brought
together by digital technology, many online communities have extensive Frequently
Asked Questions (FAQs) that provide detailed information about the group norms and
attempt to establish a common field, but despite this kind of information,
misunderstandings and clashes are common.

Other researchers have observed that CMC discourse combines the "space-bound,
static, permanent" quality of writing with the "time-bound, dynamic, transient" quality of
speaking (Davis & Brewer, 1997, p. 2). Online texts, unlike spoken discourse, may be
planned and revised, but contain much of the "spontaneity of oral discourse" and
participants in research studies "reported spending little time planning and revising
electronic mail messages," the probable reason for the "misspellings and the use of unconventional punctuation, diction, and capitalization in electronic discourse" (Abdullah, 1998, Section 1, para 2). Computer-mediated communication (CMC) discourse often contains fragmented and incomplete sentences, as well as short chunks of speech. In comparison, written language is characterized by a high frequency of complex and compound sentences containing subordinate clauses as well as a preponderance of nominalized forms (ideas expressed in noun form when a verb form is possible) in which information is concentrated and compacted (Ivanic, 1998, p. 265-269; Davis & Brewer, 1997, p. 4; Brown & Yule, 1983, cited in Abdullah, 1998, Section 2, para 5). In online communication, individuals do not worry overmuch about spelling, grammar, and sentence structure, and this style is, for the most part, more informal and relaxed than the style required in formal, academic papers and essays.

Drawing on Biber's (1988) study of the "multidimensional relations between the many different types of speech and writing in English" (p. 4), Davis and Brewer (1997) also observe that "careful word choice" "is expected in written discourse, but does not characterize most kinds of speech situations" (p. 4). They cite Biber's findings that linguistic features which refer to the recipient of the text are more marked in spoken texts than in written ones, which are more 'detached' in nature: "often marked by agentless passives and nominalizations, which characterizes situations that are not two-way interaction" (p. 5).

In her analysis of online discourse in a graduate course on education, Lapadat (2000) observed that the "blend of both written language and oral language characteristics" she found "may have been particularly facilitative of the cognitive level of the discourse ( p. 15). As the students were graduate students and brought "academic habits of mind" to their posts, most were formulated in "complete, well-formed sentences, literate grammatical structures with complex clausal structures rather than the additive, aggregative, and redundant patterns found in oral texts," and "textual argument structures that freeze meaning and rely on readers' ability to look back and use of precise, formal vocabulary" (p. 17).

Lapadat felt that the writing process engendered reflection "rather than tossing out remarks in rapid speech" and contributed to a "textual environment with considerable potential to foster deep meaning-making" (p. 17). On the other hand, the students were "relaxed about matters of spelling and paragraphing" and "did not edit their writing as closely as they would for a final draft of a term paper." While students employed "a literate pattern of academic argumentation," "they also "inserted conversational elements
into their contributions,” including “personal anecdotes and stories” which served to “anchor their points” (pp 17-18)

We have observed similar features of the online discourse analyzed in this study. The students ranged greatly in ability. While some brought “academic habits of mind” to the composition of their posts, others were still in the process of acquiring such habits through writing online posts and formal academic essays. Some posts employed patterns of academic argumentation, while others, because they did not employ the accepted patterns, were deemed lacking in coherence. While the majority of the posts were framed in fully-formed sentences, the writers inserted conversational elements into their posts, particularly by inserting more linguistic features that referred to or marked the presence of the reader than commonly found in written texts.

The students in Lapadat’s study were all teachers taking an education course, so it is not surprising that they would insert “personal anecdotes and stories” meant “to explicate and “anchor their points” into their posts. Such anecdotes helped the students bridge the gap between theory and practice by illustrating how a theoretical construct played out in classroom practice. In our sample, very few students have included personal anecdotes, but the majority of students have included references to contemporary or historical examples which could bridge the gap between the abstract proposition which they were asked to argue and what such abstract concepts mean in real life. Several students included references to common phenomena such as peer pressure which most of them had experienced to directly anchor their points.

In my opinion, the hybrid nature of online discourse, which displays the characteristics of both spoken and written discourse, and which encompasses both highly formal and informal texts, is an important factor in our analysis of the relationship between online posting and formal academic writing, as the students draw on online discourse, a discourse with which they are comfortable and familiar, as one of the many discourses that inform the discoursal self they present. As in many of the posts discussed previously, students use both an informal style and formal academic lexis in their posts. They compose their posts fluently and, as the large number of spelling mistakes, typos, and grammatical errors, rarely edit and revise as carefully as they would formal academic essays. However, the majority of students are able to convey their ideas clearly and have no problem making their point and supporting it with evidence in an online post, which makes online posts an effective format in which to appropriate the most important aspects of the formal academic genre. An online post, if well structured is a “coherent text,” in which, ideas are carefully structured and fully explicated, yet a text which is more immediate and less detached than a formal academic essay. It is a text in which,
as Warschauer (1997) puts it, "[t]he historical divide between speech and writing has been overcome with the interactional and reflective aspects of language merged in a single medium" (p. 472).

5.3 "Making your point"

In the more informal and relaxed atmosphere of the discussion boards, the students reported that they had little trouble composing their online postings. In interviews they described the main purpose of a post as "making your point":

there's some type of point and then there's a couple of paragraphs trying to support that point.
basically structure a couple of paragraphs and.. you can get your point across pretty well

Although the students consciously structure their posts to include a clear point and "couple of paragraphs trying to support that point," they know that they will not be penalized for spelling errors, typing mistakes, or grammatical errors. Online discourse offers the advantage of giving writers the opportunity to plan and organize their discourse while at the same time, writers can write more informally in a register closer to spontaneous spoken discourse. Sims (1996) reported that most users spent little time planning and revising e-mail messages, and suggested that the spontaneous quality of online discourse was the reason for the unconventional spelling, punctuation, and diction that characterizes it (cited in Abdullah, 1998). When asked about their composition practices in interviews, the students reported that they did not spend a long amount of time on their posts, generally between 30 minutes and an hour, suggesting that they wrote fluently and did not spend too much time editing or revising before posting. Certainly, there are many spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammatical errors in the posts I have cited, but the writer's main idea is usually clear and easy to follow. Through writing posts, the students bridge the gap between the literacy practice which are familiar and comfortable and an unfamiliar literacy practice, writing a formal academic essay by structuring their online posts as well formulated arguments but couching them in more direct, informal language.

Generally, the students formulated an argument, looked through the reading to find support, and then posted. No one I interviewed claimed to spend a lot of time editing and re-drafting a post as they would a formal essay. Most students enjoyed writing the posts and commented that they were "significantly less formal" and therefore less onerous than the other kinds of writing they were asked to do. When I asked the students to
compare writing assignments in this class and in other English classes they had taken, they talked about essay writing assignments. It Interestingly, until I asked about it, none of the students I interviewed had recognized that there was a connection between the structure of a post and the structure of an academic essay, although when we discussed it, we agreed that both require a writer to ensure that s/he makes his or her points and provides adequate and relevant support for them. From the interview data, I would infer that the students generally equate “writing” with “essay writing,” and do not consider online posting a writing assignment.

One student said, “it feels. . . it feels kind of like a conversation,” and described the discussion board as a place where the students could “engage freely in discussion.” Another student commented, “I’ve never struggled for something to say” when composing an online post although she did struggle with her formal essays. The students also commented that online posting was “significantly less formal” and they were less overtly concerned with the way that they worded their posts:

- in one of them you’re trying to. . . make a point . . . the other one you’re trying to make a point, too but you have to make it in a way that. . . the teacher. . . gives you more marks I guess... here you’re not competing for marks, you’re just. . . the other way you have to put it down. . . the way you have to word it . . . more close... you’re more conscious of that

While the students were writing for an audience in their online posts, they were able to use an informal style: “the way I write my diction is more like I’m speaking,” but felt that a much more formal style was required in essays and the students were therefore “more conscious” of the way they worded their points and of a critical audience judging their work. The point of writing an essay was “in order to get more marks,” while the point of a post was to “share something” with peers. Although the students were unaware of it, it was precisely this quality of their posts that the instructors most wanted them to transfer to their formal writing assignments.

5.4 Talking about what you know

Many students commented that a major advantage of the online format was that they could draw upon personal experiences and previous knowledge in their posts while in formal essays they felt the need to incorporate formal secondary sources (despite the fact that this was not required by the instructors in this course).

The course is structured to facilitate authentic communication. The instructors have consciously integrated as many ways to encourage students to “say something they
actually want to communicate to others” into the websites, from the dialogic nature of the didactic materials, to the questions linking to threaded discussions found in all sections of the website, to the discussion board assignments. Every assignment includes a question that asks students to consider issues raised in the text in comparison to their own experience and knowledge. All the website materials are designed to encourage the students to speak out as individuals and to incorporate what they know from their personal history and background into their responses. As previously discussed, this is a conscious strategy on the part of the course coordinator and consultant, and echoes their concern with the fundamental issues of the course, to celebrate individuality, encourage minority opinions, and validate students as individuals and not just members of the herd. By finding ways to connect the students’ personal knowledge, expertise, and experience to the themes and issues in the course texts, the instructors and course creators encourage students to integrate their autobiographical selves and the “rich stew” of discourses which they bring to their writing into their evolving understanding and mastery of the academic literacy practices and the discoursal selves they present in their posts. Furthermore, by validating what the students know and who they are, the course positions the students as “legitimate speakers,” to use Bourdieu’s terminology, speakers whose voices deserve to be heard and whose views deserve recognition.

In addition to validating the students’ knowledge and experience, the course gives students numerous opportunities to participate in a form of academic discourse that Bourdieu would term “legitimate discourse.” As Bourdieu envisions it, legitimate discourse, within the context of a particular speaking situation, is a discourse in which an “appropriate speaker (as opposed to an "imposter),” addresses an “appropriate listener,” in a “legitimate situation,” and formulated in the appropriate “phonological and syntactic forms” (Norton, 2000, p. 69). For example, in a wedding, the bride and groom are “legitimate speakers” and “appropriate listeners” who utter the wedding vows, not the priest, judge, or minister who officiates. Similarly, the official does not invite everyone to “hang out” but to “gather” to witness the ceremony. Although this formulation seems obvious, the miscommunication and misunderstandings that result from situations in which it is difficult to identify the appropriate speakers, listeners, or linguistic forms can have serious consequences. By the same token, failed attempts to position oneself as a legitimate speaker worthy of inclusion in a particular situation can lead to profound feelings of shame or alienation.

Although Bonny Norton’s study of identity and language is not a study of academic discourse communities, her analysis of the struggle her participants, who were immigrant women, faced in establishing themselves as legitimate speakers in social
interactions with English-speaking Canadians is pertinent in this context. A small vignette from Norton’s study aptly illustrates the importance of having the right cultural capital in establishing the right to speak, and the alienation and frustration that results when that right is denied, even in the most seemingly innocuous social exchange. Eva, one of Norton’s participants, found herself quickly shut out of a conversation when she admitted to not knowing who Bart Simpson was. Positioned as “someone who is strange, someone who did not have the cultural knowledge that is commonplace,” Eva was considered an “imposter” and finds herself unable to reply when her coworker asks, “Don’t you watch TV? That’s Bart Simpson” (Norton, 2000, p. 130). Shamed, she silenced herself.

Bourdieu argues that in any speaking situation, the speaker addresses the listener as worthy and capable of understanding his or her meaning while the listener regards the speaker as worthy of speaking, while in the majority of situations, this is not the case. The “right to speak” is often contested, and individuals may be silenced or silence themselves because they do not feel that they have the right to speak, or, as Bourdieu frames it, “the power to impose reception” (Bourdieu, 1977 p. 75, cited in Norton, 1995, p. 8). In other words, a speaker wishes not only to speak but to be “believed, obeyed, respected, and distinguished” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 648, cited in Norton, 2000, p. 113).

The findings in this study can be situated in relation to Bourdieu’s framework and Norton’s use of it in her analysis. One of the central findings is that through participation in online discussion and postings, students are empowered with the right to speak and the cultural capital they bring from their own experience is validated through connection to the central issues in the course. In other words, each student is validated as an individual rather than “just one among many,” an individual who has a right to speak and to be heard. Both the online discourse and interviews revealed that many students voluntarily posted more than once a week and felt free to incorporate matters of personal relevance and interest into their interpretations of the course texts. They also felt that they could speak directly from a personal subject “I” position and, as in the case of the Tiananmen Square post, even overtly call attention to their message: “I want everyone to pay attention.” Most importantly, students began to appropriate academic discursive strategies and formats and to integrate them with the discourses and formats with which they were already familiar through participation in online discussion.

5.5 Encountering others’ views

Many students commented that they often read other posts before or after they submitted their own posting, just to see what others had to say, and were often surprised to find that others had widely different and sometimes opposing views. Even when they did not receive responses, the students were aware that others were reading
and might respond, and the online discussion at times became an ongoing dialogue which exposed them to diverse viewpoints and forced them to consider alternative and opposing views. Many students commented that they found this one of the most valuable aspects of the course. One of the students whom I interviewed described herself as an “obvious extrovert” who “talks a lot,” and felt that the online environment gave her a chance to hear from others who did not have the “self-confidence the experience or whatever to feel like they can jump in there”:

but their opinions are equally valuable and at least for someone like me who seems to dominate many discussions I really appreciate reading what other people have to say

All evidence, whether from student posts, secondary sources, or the primary text, is considered equal. Both the course description and the TAs reiterated the fact that student writing on the website is considered a resource for writing more formal essays and examinations. The students are told that they “are responsible for the website” when they prepare for their final exam, and they are encouraged to incorporate ideas and quotes from others’ posts in all their writing. Although suggestions for further reading are included in each module, no formal bibliography of secondary sources is provided and the students are not required to use secondary sources in their formal written assignments. By encouraging students to incorporate their peers’ contributions and views into formal written assignments rather than secondary sources (although many of the students did use at least one secondary source in their essay), the instructors ensure that the student writers will have a genuine audience for their ideas and that their contributions will be read and taken seriously. At the same time, this practice validates the students’ views, formally sanctioning the students as having the right to speak and a voice worthy of being heard. By encouraging online dialogue, the instructors are fostering an academic discourse community in which members are both legitimated as bringing valuable knowledge and experience to the conversation and at the same time opening discursive spaces in which alternative opinions and conflicting views may be heard:

for like essays they encourage that you like talk about a post that you’ve seen or like an argument and so . . . I really like that . . . you know . . . you’re forced to like listen to other people and see how they analyzed different situations in comparison to your own . . .

. I think it helps to . . . like actually think about. . . more than one side of like . . . the argument . . . to have to think about another. . . and also it kind of makes you read other people’s posts to see where they’re going with that . . . you’re like ‘okay’. . . because sometimes like. . . you don’t see that . . . so you’re like ‘okay’ and then the person explains it. . . you know. . . but much better than like in class where you
might not... even pay attention to what they're saying and so that's what I like
about the posts a lot

.. it was interesting to see like people... to see a posting that was a really good
strong argument that was maybe like the exact opposite of what you thought... so
I think it is interesting to see some of those.. like when they're really well done
you're like wow.. like it makes you think about it..

Students in this course bring all manner of cultural capital with them into their
reading and discussion of the course texts. Rather than privileging certain readings or
interpretations of the text, the instructors provide the students with opportunities to
connect their readings to their personal experiences, legitimating the cultural capital they
bring with them rather than establishing a distinction between valid cultural capital ("On
Liberty" as a representative of "Great books" or John Stuart Mill as a representative of
"Great Authors") and inappropriate or irrelevant cultural capital (discussion of smoking,
liquor regulations, the role of the media in contemporary politics, the Tiananmen Square
massacre). By legitimating the students' knowledge and experience, they have validated
and acknowledged the students' contributions as cultural capital and the students
themselves as members of the university community.

Several students commented that they often looked at others' posts because they
were interested to see how others had interpreted or critiqued an idea. Having to explain
the idea in writing resulted in a clearer explanation, "much better than like in class where
you might not... even pay attention to what they're saying," and students often paid
closer attention to what others said online than they would have in face-to-face class
discussion. The website resembled an ongoing dialogue to which the students
contributed, a place where they felt they could "engage freely in discussion," at the same
time conscious that others were reading their posts and that they might get responses.
Being "forced to listen to other people" made the students more aware of the fact that
there is always "more than one side of the argument" as they formulated their own
arguments, and reinforced the need to support their arguments with relevant evidence
that would make them more convincing (which resulted in the increasing number of
hyperlinks to online references for more information).

These comments echo the course coordinator's observation that the mixed-mode
environment realizes the "core values of the course":

[the] intellectual values of the course . . . were closely related to. . . mixed mode
technological possibilities . . . so what I was interested in doing . . . what I think
we've done . . . is to give what you might call electronic expression . . . to the core
values of the course . . . now . . . it's a course in non-fictional prose so . . . you can
select . . . whatever you want to teach . . . and what I selected . . . over the years
were mainly texts that had to do with... individual assertion the... desirability of a... variety of opinions and the importance of hearing... minority views

In a research study of an online graduate course in which the assessment criteria for the "required students to make reference to conference discussions," Mary Lea found that when the students incorporated peers' comments from the discussion board along with secondary sources, the students consistently foregrounded the points and claims made in online discussion and supported them with "links and references to authoritative works in relation to the points raised, either in their own messages or in the messages of others" (Lea, 2001, p. 174). Lee points out that

More traditional academic convention might expect the work of the recognised and authoritative published author to be foregrounded, and experiential or anecdotal evidence provided by the student to illustrate the authoritative evidence. In this course students make reference to published works in both of these ways but appear to feel quite comfortable foregrounding their own debates and experience rather than those of a recognised authority. This is more in line with conventions adopted by established academic writers, who often foreground their own voice as authoritative, depending upon the conventions of the discipline. . . . It does suggest that the processes observed by Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995), in the communicative practices of established academics, are also taking place in students' disciplinary communication with each other (Lea, 2001, p. 174-175).

Both Lea's findings and the analysis of the online discourse in this study show that validating the students' online contributions and incorporating them into formal written assignments facilitates integration of autobiographical, discoursal, and authorial selves, and speeds progression from novice status to full participants in academic discourse communities by validating the knowledge and experience they bring with them as legitimate.

5.6 Combating "essayese"

Students agreed that posting before the weekly face-to-face discussion section was valuable, partly because they had to read it in order to post, and particularly because it gave them time to reflect on the material whereas, as both students and instructors noted, in lecture classes students often come to class without having done the reading and are thus unprepared to participate in discussion.

I like having to post weekly before the session... because it actually gives you the chance to have your own thoughts instead of like getting to class and being like 'oh yeah like I kind of agree with that'... 'oh I'll go with that... you know... platform' instead of... just like thinking it yourself and you know... instead of just like giving into... whatever sounds better... from somebody else [emphasis added]
This comment echoes the course coordinator's comment that the course has been set up so that "you have... no answers provided... or few answers provided" so that "the students think it through for themselves." Student interviews revealed that the students often came from high school unsure as to whether they were, indeed, expected to think for themselves. One of the students commented that in high school:

it was basically... like you know 'read this'... 'we told kind of what it meant'... to just put it there

She felt that one of her major difficulties in her first year of university was finding the courage to "think outside the box." Another student, who was in engineering, commented that, coming from a discipline in which he was required to absorb a massive amount of information rather than interrogate or reflect on it, he valued the chance to really "think about stuff":

they throw a lot of courses at you and a lot of... and you can't even think... like... you can't think deeply about it... you can't make a like in-depth analysis of things

As one TA pointed out, one of the things the instructors looked for was an in-depth analysis of the material, including evidence of the students' "bringing their own take to bear" on the material, "pulling apart the argument... and even finding ways to contradict the authors that we're studying as opposed to just sort of saying... accepting the texts as they are." In Bakhtinian terms, it can be seen as the difference between passively repeating the word without understanding it and consciously appropriating the word by infusing with the author's particular meaning and intentions as he or she engages in dialogue with those who have previously used it and with readers through the act of writing.

The imperative to "think for yourself" and at the same time to situate your thinking in connection with others can be confusing to students who are new to academic writing (and to those who have written many research papers and essays, as well, for that matter). This confusion is reflected in some of the strategies which we saw in the postings in this module. Students who simply appropriate a text without incorporating it into their argument may do so because they think it is what their instructors want them to do. They are used to being "told what it meant" and to reproducing what they are told on examinations. As the interviews revealed, students who had come from North American high schools brought such expectations with them, not just students from other cultural backgrounds.
Students therefore need to learn to distinguish between using evidentials to support and explicate their ideas and simply accepting "whatever sounds better from somebody else," whether it is the instructional materials, lecture notes, or what someone else says in class just because it "sounds better." One of the disadvantages of the online environment is that there are a plethora of available texts which are easily accessible and which students may feel "sound better" than anything they have to say. In fact, there were several instances of overt plagiarism on the discussion board. This issue is of interest, but I will limit my comments to the fact that because the instructors were well acquainted with each student's authentic voice and writing style from the weekly postings, they had no difficulty identifying and finding plagiarized posts.

The transition between writing online posts and academic essays was not an easy or seamless one. The students felt that writing posts, which were "significantly less formal" than essays, was significantly less demanding. Although the instructors notice a distinct improvement in the students' writing as the course progresses, none of the students I interviewed had observed any difference. In fact, they commented that they did less writing in this course than in other English courses they had taken and in which they wrote more essays. The students did not think of online posting as a writing task, but more as a form of discussion. Yet through participation in written dialogue, they gradually transferred the qualities of discussion which the instructors prize to their academic writing. The course consultant commented that the students' ideas were "crisper" and "clearer" in their posts, and the course coordinator observed that

one of the satisfactions of teaching the course this way is to see how students . . . as the term goes on are able to . . . express themselves more vividly and directly in . . . traditional academic formats

The findings from this study suggest that there are several significant factors that contribute to the improvement in students' writing. While in their posts, students state their point and provide evidence, the instructors observed that

in essays. . . and in exams quite often students perhaps get more nervous. . . become more self-conscious about what they're doing and. . . have an idea that. . . there's a special. . . language called 'essayese' . . . or a special language for writing exams and you don't actually . . . try to explain a specific well-focused idea to a reader. . . you. . . have to go through this ritual of a huge introduction with a lot of . . . padding

One of the TAs provided a further example of "essayese":

like they've got this . . . this thing that they do which we always joke about . . . they'll start an essay with 'society believes' or 'since the dawn of time' . . . 'history
tells us’ . . . like these huge generalizations and sweeping statements . . . and they’ll use these generalizations throughout the entire essay

In the posts taken from the online discussion of Mill, we have seen many examples of academic vocabulary and use of complex sentence structures along with examples of “essayese.” The examples included were in posts in which the writer made very general statements couched in an academic lexis instead of incorporating specific examples or references as evidence for his or her argument:

- **Throughout the history of mankind**, there have been many governing authorities who claimed themselves to be democratic but still hold the absolute power.
- **Historical examples of each are numerous**, while **examples of society in general** without the direction of a government being tyrannical are unheard of.

Other examples include the examples in which students simply copy and paste large citations taken from internet sources into their posts without incorporating them into an argument, incorporate citations without overtly explaining how they support a specific argument, or incorporating citations without clearly establishing the boundary between words which have been taken from a source and the writer’s own words. All these practices make the writer’s argument unclear and hard to follow and may well manifest the writer’s insecurity as to whether he or she has anything of value to contribute or assumption that including evidence means including as much evidence as possible rather than incorporating and appropriating it judiciously and infusing it with the writer’s intentions.

On the other hand, many writers, such as the writer who discussed the control of the media in contemporary America and the writer who used apartheid as an example of the “tyranny of government,” successfully appropriated and incorporated other texts into their argument and infused them with their personal intentions and purposes. They also very successfully incorporated two diverse texts: one drawn from a contemporary example and the other from Mill, creating “multi-voiced” texts in which the interplay of voices opened a discursive space for dialogue, a “thinking text” in which the writer used the evidence as a springboard to develop and illustrate his or her ideas.

Other students also incorporated features of the more informal spoken style often found in online communication with those of a more formal academic register, as in the example discussing the Japanese invasion of China. In that example, we saw the writer appropriating academic lexis that suited and conveyed his message rather than one that masked empty generalities or made his argument hard to identify or follow. In our interview, the course consultant also touched on the issue of vocabulary differences
between the discussion boards and formal writing assignments, commenting that when writing online

they don't . . . feel that they have to . . . write formal prose . . . I think often that the writing . . . is a bit better. . I think because they use words that they're familiar with . . . and they don't try to impress . . . using polysyllabic words

As the examples we have looked at demonstrate, the use of "polysyllabic words," if used to convey an actual message, can be very effective. It is when the words are simply thrown into the writing to "impress" that they ring false. Yet students use such words because they think this is what their instructors want to hear, just as the students in this study included words such as "argument," "evidence," and "refute" in their online writing.

I would suggest that when writing for their peers, even in a more academic context such as a discussion board, students naturally express themselves in simpler, more direct language. The "essayese" style is one that students adopt when they write formal academic assignments because they think it is the language that "teacher . . . gives you more marks." It is the language of academia, a language full of polysyllabic words that often make the content hard to divine.

When adopting this style, the students mask their authentic voices in a discoursal self which is alien to them, and the discoursal self who appears on the page consequently does not express him or herself in the vivid, direct way that the discoursal self in the online posts does. At the same time, the students are unsure as to how to how much authority they have a right to claim over their writing, and project an authorial self which evades making direct claims, falls back on indirect phrases, evades issues of agency through the passive voice, and makes lexical choices that the students think will appeal to their TAs and professors, although, in fact, their TAs and professors much prefer the more direct, vivid, authentic voices that emerge in online discourse.

Both the course consultant and the coordinator felt having a sense of writing for an audience was the major factor in the improvement in students' writing. The interviews confirmed that the dialogic nature of the website and the feeling that they were contributing to an ongoing discussion and might receive response to their postings gave the students a sense of audience which they didn't have when writing formal academic assignments, and, as we have seen, many of the students used the inclusive "we" and "let's forms or addressed their audience directly with questions and imperatives in their posts. The course coordinator felt that the connection between online posting and essays should be made more explicit to students and that when given a formal essay assignment they should be told:
'when you write an essay, keep in mind what you were doing in postings . . . that is. . . is keep in mind that audience. . . remember that somebody's actually going to read the thing . . . and that you want that person . . . or those people to understand. . . the arguments that you're making'

I would suggest that when writing for their peers, even in a more academic context such as a discussion board, students naturally express themselves in simpler, more direct language. The "essayese" style is one that students adopt when they write formal academic assignments because they think it is the language of academia, a language full of polysyllabic words that often makes the content hard to divine, but one which will gain them acceptance and recognition by members of the academy. We are all well aware of the ways in which we use language to identify and situate ourselves in different social situations. Both the way we dress and the way we speak vary depending upon where we are, who we are with, and the role we play in a particular situation.

Bourdieu included language along with dress, body language, and behaviors, in his definition of symbolic capital, one of the many goods which "present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after" and which endow their possessor with a similar quality. We are certainly aware that certain uses of language are privileged while others are not, and that we are quickly identified and judged by our use of language. Bourdieu frames "linguistic exchange" as a "symbolic balance of power" in which "linguistic capital" is "calculated to procure a certain materials or symbolic profit" (Bourdieu, 1982, pp 59-60, cited in Snook, 1990, p. 169-170). This exchange is constantly realized within educational institutions, both through written and spoken discourse, as the acquisition of cultural capital prepares students for the acquisition of symbolic and economic capital in their future lives, and students compete for not only symbolic but economic materials and profit in the form of recommendations, scholarships, and prestigious positions in the academy.

Bourdieu argues that the function of schooling is to integrate students into a 'linguistic community' in which a certain kind of language has a certain kind of symbolic value or, as Bourdieu phrases it, "dominates the market" (Bourdieu, 1977b, pp 651-652, cited in Snook, 1990, p. 170). Language, like mode of dress and style, conveys status, indicating that "a certain person is to be believed, obeyed, respected" (Snook, 1990, p. 172). Bourdieu's framework enables us to recognize that the prevalence of "essayese" in the writing of students who are new to the academy reflects their awareness (whether or not it is on the conscious level) that they are engaged in a struggle for legitimacy and their assumption that through the use of certain linguistic forms, they will be recognized as legitimate members of the academy. This finding is disheartening as we know from their instructors' comments, that it has exactly the opposite effect.
In using "essayese," students adopt a discoursal self which is alien to them, and the discoursal self who appears on the page consequently does not express him or herself in the vivid, direct way that the discoursal self in the online posts does. Students are unsure as to how to how much authority they have a right to claim through their writing, and project an authorial self which evades making direct claims, falls back on indirect phrases, evades issues of agency through the passive voice, and makes lexical choices that they think will appeal to their TAs and professors, although, in fact, their TAs and professors much prefer the more direct, vivid, authentic voices that emerge in online discourse.

Our analysis of the language found in online posts has led us to a deeper understanding of the role that language plays in negotiating often conflicting identities, values, and ways of thinking in the seemingly simple social practices involved in composing a written text. As with many things in life, what seems at first straightforward proves to be, upon closer examination, a complex and challenging task. Similarly, textual analysis, which seemed at first straightforward—identifying the correlation between pronouns and subject positions—proved to be an infinitely more complex and challenging task, one which led to greater insights about the relationship between discourse, social practices, writing, and identity within the context of the academy.

5.7 Conclusion

When I began looking at the use of pronouns in this study, I had no idea that I would find notions drawn from Bakhtin and Bourdieu so helpful in illuminating the data. It seemed that every time I felt I had achieved some insight into the complex interplay between discourse, identity, the online environment, and academic writing, new questions emerged and I returned to the data again. I hesitate to claim that I have made any definitive conclusions based on this study, but I do feel that this study opens up some new and provocative questions.

In our analysis of the data, we have seen how participation in online discussion facilitated the transition from novice to full participant in the academic community as students acquired and incorporated the discursive practices of academia into their writing, integrating them with the more familiar discourses, the knowledge and experience the students brought with them to the academy, and texts which they drew upon when writing. Becoming a full participant in the academic discourse community entails finding an authentic authorial self who can confidently claim the right to speak on the page. Validation as a member of the community and as a legitimate speaker is facilitated, as we have seen, by the website materials and by online discussion between
peers. Although they are aware that the instructors are reading their posts, when writing online, students feel that they can “engage freely in discussion” without overt direction or moderation. In the online this environment, students claim the right to speak and find that they have something to say which others are interested in hearing.

The characteristics of the online environment play a large role in this process. It is an informal environment in which students feel free to talk about “what you know” and share things you’ve “figured out.” Students equate online discussion with sharing what they know rather than speaking as experts, a role they feel they are called upon to adopt in formal assignments, a persona which masks their true self and in which they express themselves awkwardly and inauthentically. We have noted this in our analysis of several examples from the online posts. As we have seen in many posts, the practice of online posting enables students to successfully incorporate the discourses and texts with which they are familiar with the more formal academic prose of John Stuart Mill, integrating what they know and value into their evolving understanding of academic texts and academic literacy practices. The Bakhtinian notion of appropriation has illuminated examples of student writing in which the students have used Mill’s ideas and vocabulary to speak about issues that are of interest to them.

Appropriation has many faces. Although we have looked at this notion primarily in terms of integrating literary texts into personal responses, the students are also writing for an audience and reading others’ contributions. Their awareness that others are reading their posts and that they may receive responses to their writing motivates them to communicate their ideas clearly and to address their readers through dialogue. Many of the discursive strategies we have identified in our analysis reflect the ways in which the students’ sense of an audience is manifested in their writing.

In the informal online environment, students feel free to speak as themselves in an informal, spoken language in which they are positioned and address one another as equals. It is an environment in which they encounter a diversity of opinions and views, and in which no one view is privileged (which, as the interviews revealed, is very different from the view of English studies which many students bring to the university with them: one in which they equate studying a text with being instructed to reproduce a privileged interpretation).

The fluidity and informality of the online environment is reflected in the students’ writing practices: they compose their messages rapidly and fluently rather than struggling with spelling, citation, and vocabulary choices, drawing upon a wide range of discourses, both personal and disciplinary, during the writing process. Cognizant that they need to make their point and include some kind of support, they incorporate
academic formats such as clear topic sentences, connected discourse, appropriate vocabulary, and evidentials into their posts. They move between an informal and more formal academic vocabulary, between the shorter sentences and phrases characteristic of CMC and the longer, more complex sentence structures of formal prose, incorporating a wide range of discourses and texts into their online writing. Students employ inclusive pronouns such as “we” and “our” to create a sense of affiliation between writer and reader, drawing upon shared knowledge and common experiences to support their arguments. They also include examples drawn from their particular background knowledge and interests, sometimes incorporating further evidence in the form of hyperlinks to websites with further information, a practice which became increasingly common in this particular online environment and is characteristic of this particular community.

Although the students are well aware that their posts are being read by their TAs, they direct them to their peers. The instructors felt that it is when the students transfer the “vivid,” “direct” quality of their online writing to a “traditional academic format, that they make the most improvement. It is precisely this quality that the instructors most value, yet the students themselves seem to be unaware of this. Feeling that they need to phrase their ideas in ways that will gain them higher grades, they adopt the dreaded “essayese” style, making sweeping statements and using polysyllabic words that mask their intended meaning rather than communicate it.

Because the students themselves seem to be unaware of what their instructors consider one of the greatest advantages of online writing and continue to equate improvement in their writing with writing more formal essays than with participation in online discussion, I would suggest that the instructors draw the students’ attention to this aspect of the course, either through individual commentary or by showing them examples of writing from previous classes and pointing out the ways in which other students have successfully incorporated aspects of the online postings into formal essays and exams.

This study has focused on the social practices involved in online argumentation using textual evidence from literary texts. Through instructor interviews, we have seen how the instructors’ beliefs and values have been realized in the website design and materials, as well as in the course syllabus and practices. The instructors have shared their reflections on the course aims and teaching practices, while the students have shared their reflections on the experience of engaging in online discussion: both its benefits and drawbacks, and their personal experiences as learners in the course. Our analysis of the instructors’ and students’ views, combined with analysis of the online
discourse, has enabled us to draw connections between theory and practice as manifested in online interaction and dialogue.

Our analysis has shown us that there are many ways in which learners engage with one another and with texts through online discussion and that articulating thought and sharing insights with others in the online environment can have great advantages, especially for learners who are in the process of appropriating academic discourse and finding their place in the academic community. The fluidity and hybridity of the online would appear to provide an environment in which students feel comfortable and free, facilitating dialogue and interchange through which students engage in knowledge-building discourse.

There are several ways in which the present study could be expanded. Rather than looking for general features in the students' writing, I would like to follow several students through the course of the semester in order to identify specific discourses they used, the discourses they appropriated when they spoke out and reasons why and ways in which students masked themselves in inauthentic linguistic styles. I would like to interview students individually in order to gain a better perspective of the specific issues they struggled with in their writing. As the interviews in this study were focus group interviews, I did not have the opportunity to obtain this kind of in-depth data. Similarly, I did not have access to the students' formal essays or exams so that I could compare their online writing with their formal assignments. Such a comparison would add a further layer of depth to the analysis, but obtaining permission would be problematic. Roz Ivanic knew the participants in her study very well and had tutored several of them before embarking on her research project. They granted her access to their writing because, at least in part, of a longstanding relationship, and Ivanic positions them as "co-researchers" rather than "participants" in her study, consciously granting them equal status. She has also co-authored several papers with her co-researchers, although she is the sole author of the book based on her study.

Although this study does focus on issues of audience, I did not include data in which students had engaged interactively with one another and developed threaded discussions. This is an aspect of engagement that deserves a full and detailed analysis, something which I would like to pursue in the future. Interview data touched on a related issue-- intertextuality and plagiarism. I referred to this briefly, but would like to analyze the relationship between intertextual references between posts and intertextual references to other texts in order to situate the issue of plagiarism in the context of online discussion. Ivanic also identified plagiarism and intertextuality as an obstacle for
the participants in her study, and it would be useful to have more detailed interview data as well.

As the data included in this study did not show many examples of learners appropriating others' texts, this was not a focus of my analysis. However, this is another facet of the issue of appropriation which deserves detailed analysis in order to explore ways in which the "many-to-many communication" afforded by the online environment facilitates appropriation in both positive and negative ways. As I mentioned previously, there were several examples of plagiarism in the online posts, and the students also commented on this aspect of the posting. I feel that this is quite a complex and provocative issue.

Many of the students were non-native speakers of English, and it would be particularly interesting to follow their progress through the semester and to identify specific features of their writing which contributed to or hindered their transition to full participants in the academy and to see whether any particular patterns of engagement indicate specific topics and approaches that were particularly helpful to ESL writers.

I am fascinated by the issues of legitimate discourse, symbolic capital, and cultural capital that have emerged from this study, and would like to focus on these theoretical constructs in order to better understand how they are perceived and enacted by different students through their writing.

I have focused on a small section of all the data collected during this study, and would like to look at other grammatical features which I did not focus on in this study in order to identify other specific grammatical features that the students use and the purposes for which they use them. In particular, it would be interesting to look at the use of modals, boosters, and hedges in the overall data to see how they are used in a larger corpus of data as there was so little use made of them in this particular section of the data.

Finally, I would like to see the findings of this kind of research used as the basis for course and website design. Although the global issues ("complex connectivity," "epistemic literacy," "collaborative learning possibilities") introduced by the theorists cited in the introduction are certainly of interest, I feel that the most important use we can make of the findings of this study is in bridging the divide between theory and practice and applying the insights we have gained to actual teaching and learning practices in order to actively engage students in knowledge-building discourse and motivate them to become lifelong learners rather than students who view their degrees as job qualifications and nothing more.
My experience with this study echoes an observation the composer Yannick Nézet-Séguin, who was recently appointed to lead the Rotterdam Philharmonic, made in an interview with the CBC when he said, "you know, there is a truth about music but the beauty is you never find it." Whether we are musicians, literary scholars, writers, artists, or researchers, we are all engaged in looking for an elusive "truth" which we divine but never fully apprehend. And the beauty of it is that we continue to search for it, never satisfied that we have finally found it.
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