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Faces, hearts and thumbs: Exploring the use of Emoji in online teacher-student communications in higher education

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For many students, online communication is a significant element of academic language support, and can include messaging via a learning management system and social media. This mode must still meet all the needs of the professional teacher-student relationship, and safe, ethical boundaries must be maintained in spite of using communication tools that are often more aligned with informal communications – including popular short cuts, such as emojis.

Emojis – small digital images or icons used to express an idea or emotion in electronic communication – have significantly changed the way we communicate by adding nuance to a written exchange. Indeed, Emoji has become an optional, global language, "intended to illustrate, or in some cases replace altogether, the words we send each other digitally" (Sternbergh, 2014, p. 3). This phenomenon is widespread, with more than 90% of online users incorporating emojis in texts and emails (Kaye, Malone, & Wall, 2017), and teachers are no exception. Yet without vocal cues or body language, online communication can be a minefield of misunderstandings (Schwartz, 2015). How clear are students and tutors, really, about the quick-click-response communication they share online?

This paper shares findings from current research into whether we are 'speaking emoji' in the same wordless tongue (Sternbergh, 2014) suggesting changes are needed in practice and pedagogy.

Key words: Emojis, tertiary education, Facebook, non-verbal communication.

1. Introduction

1.1. Why talk Emoji?

In my non-teaching role as a faculty research coordinator within a tertiary institution I work on a variety of online platforms that represent different modes of communication with colleagues on my home campus and our satellite campuses. These include email, Skype, Slack, iMessage, Moodle, Google Docs, texting, and more. All are considered acceptable, most are considered necessary. The mode of communication I use depends on both the formality and hierarchical nature of the relationship I have with various colleagues. I would not, for example, use the Facebook Instant Message app to communicate with my manager but I do text her to make last minute changes to meeting times. Thinking about why that might be highlighted the existence of unspoken 'rules'

around the formality of modes of communication I communicate with different colleagues in different ways. In a time-poor context where communication is instant and quick click responses are the norm, emojis have found a very comfortable position in non-verbal exchanges. But do we all interpret these exchanges in the same way, and if not, are we therefore using them appropriately?

Working in an educational environment with a background in teaching at tertiary level and as a second language teacher in a private language school, I was interested in the issue of communication between students and tutors for my research. This study involved two academic tutors and four students from two Level 4, credit-bearing six month courses. With online learning options representing a significant choice for higher education today and social media chat rooms being used to facilitate more informal discussion between students, and between students and tutors, the need to ensure we are speaking the same non-verbal language is important. Part of that means we need to look closely at these engaging digital pictograms, emojis. The universal appeal of emojis is attributed by Evans (2015) to the need they fulfil in 'text-speak', with emojis mimicking what body language is to spoken communication. Given their immense popularity, there is a clear need for research to establish whether or not we are 'speaking emoji' in the same wordless tongue (Sternbergh, 2014).

1.2. What are emojis?

Emoji is an anglicised version of two Japanese words – e, 'a picture', and moji, a 'character', representing colourful, contemporary pictographic forms of facial expressions, objects and symbols, concepts and ideas from celebrations, weather and buildings, to food, plants, emotions, feelings and activities (Bliss-Carroll, 2016; Evans, 2017; Novak, Smailovic, Sluban, & Mozetic, 2015; Tandyonomanu & Tsurova, 2018). Emojis emerged in Japan at the end of the 20th Century to facilitate digital communication (Novak et al., 2015) and became standard on Android operating systems in 2013, Apple devices from 2015 and fully functional across all browsers on Windows10 in 2015 (Evans, 2017). Emojis are an appealing visual development of their precursors, emoticons, which used collections and formations of various keyboard characters to express feelings, or tone in online communications (Bliss-Carroll, 2016). Emoticons such as :-) to convey a smile are still widely used, especially as many laptops do not have emoji keys or shortcuts; however, as Smartphones with their extensive range of emoji options become ever-more prevalent, emoji use has become almost ubiquitous (Kaye et al., 2017).

With each software update, new emojis are added and as of June 2018 over 2,823 were listed in the Unicode Standard (the international encoding standard applied across digital platforms and programs) (Emojipedia, 2018; Novak et al., 2015). This number continues to grow exponentially with their global uptake, transcending borders, representing ethnicities, gender identities and more.

Having a firm grasp of, and interest in, the use of non-verbal cues in face-to-face communication led to an interest in how these cues can be conveyed in text speak. Emojis, the pictorial iteration of earlier emoticons as described above, have enabled the nuances and intent of words which can otherwise be absent from a non-verbal exchange. While these two-dimensional digital bursts of colour work in conjunction with a linguistic mode to communicate meaning, it can be all too easy to assume a universal, wordless accord (Sternbergh, 2014), but is this actually so?

2. Research questions

While much research has been done into online learning and technologies, there are fewer published studies available on technologies used in a social media environment using emojis. Such studies that there are have served to initiate an understanding of the use of social-networking sites, how we communicate, the background of emojis and their place in education. From both the observations and the interest I have in student-tutor communication coupled with the review of literature and the gaps in it, the following research question was developed to guide this study:

1. What are the pros, cons and implications of emoji use in online communication with students in a tertiary institution?

Supporting subsidiary questions were:

2. How are emojis used in online communication between students and tutors in a tertiary institution?

3. How are the most commonly used emojis in Facebook Messenger understood by the two key stakeholder groups, tutors and students?

4. How effective are emojis for communication purposes between teachers and students, via learning management systems and social media in a tertiary context?

3. Methodology

The methodology employed in this research project took an interpretivist approach, which connects the underpinning theoretical approaches and perspectives on electronic messaging in education. The interpretivist paradigm, which includes qualitative approaches, is described by Flick (2015) as being derived from, or arising out of social interactions, and that research in this field can begin by analysing the way subjects ascribe meaning to "objects, events, experiences…" (p. 24) or in this case, to emojis in the context of communication. By choosing the interpretivist paradigm it enabled me to integrate human interest into my study. It allowed me to look closely not just into the actions around visual language tools usage but also into what my colleagues thought and did as they interacted with emojis or not, what kind of problems they were confronted with as they communicated and how they dealt with them (Dudovskiy, 2018). Interpretivism incorporates the challenge to understand the meanings that individuals attach to their activities (Vanson, 2014).

4. Methods

Participants were recruited through discussions with two tutors and four students, three from each of the tutors' courses. The participants expressed their interest and willingness to participate by emailing me in response to the invitation forwarded by their tutors; the tutors themselves I approached directly as I was aware that they used social media in their classes. Table 1 shows the make-up of the participants.

Table 1. Participant profiles.

Role	Age group	Gender	Pseudonym
Tutor 1	35–40 years old	Male	Andrew
Tutor 2	45–50 years old	Female	Trish
Student 1 of Tutor 1	45–50 years old	Male	Jack
Student 2 of Tutor 1	15–20 years old	Female	Poppy
Student 1 of Tutor 2	15–20 years old	Female	Evie
Student 2 of Tutor 2	50–55 years old	Male	Donald

The research process involved semi-structured interviews. I undertook six 45 minutes interviews with two tutors and four students, with the goal of hearing from the participants how they use emojis in their student-tutor communications and what their understanding of 12 popular emojis was.

While vendors such as Samsung, Apple, Twitter, Facebook, Windows and Gmail have their own interpretation of the various pictorial symbols, the emojis I chose to use were sourced from a

recently revealed list of the most popular and frequently used emojis on Facebook (Burge, 2018). I chose to use them in particular, because the communication channel the study participants are using is supported by Facebook. These emojis may have subtle visual differences to the viewer depending on what device or software is being used (Unicode, 2018). The 12 selected 'test' emojis for the study are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Emojis used in this study for interview purposes (images retrieved from www.emojicopy.com).

1. Smiling face	2. Winking face	3. Face blowing a kiss	4. Grimacing face	5. Red heart	6. Thumbs up (skin coloured)
7. Two hearts	8. Facebook *LIKE*	9. Birthday cake	10. Loudly crying face	11. Face with tears of joy	12. Smiling face with heart eyes

Choosing to use semi-structured interviews allowed a dialogue to develop between the interviewer and interviewee, the questions intentionally covering the scope of the topic but allowing them to be asked non-sequentially (Flick, 2015) to encourage responses which were unbounded and extensive. The interviews facilitated the exploration of participants' interpretation of the meanings of situations and events, as well as their symbolic and cultural significance (Punch, 2009), and were ideal to explore the culture that exists in and amongst the student-tutor relationship in the closed Facebook chat room.

In addition to the open-ended questions used in these 45-minute semi-structured interviews with each of the participants, I also used a think-aloud technique. This approach invites participants to verbalise their thoughts while they are in the midst of completing or performing a task, which enables the observer, me, to have some idea of their cognitive processes (Salkind, 2010), of "how they go about things". It complemented the semi-structured interviews which enabled the participants to discuss their interpretations of the subject at hand, and to express themselves from their own point of view (Cohen, et al., 2017) as they showed me the actual messages they were talking about on their screens.

5. Results and themes

Data from the two key stakeholder groups – staff and students – who participated in this research indicate a number of clear perceptions about the pros, cons and implications of emoji use in online communication within a higher education context. All four students and both tutors interviewed, agreed that emoji use was an accepted part of online exchanges in their social media platforms. In talking about the emoji use by others in their programmes, all participants initially saw nothing inappropriate or alarming in the use of emojis, however further questioning revealed there were instances where meaning or intention was not clear.

5.1. Setting the scene

For one of the tutors, Trish, her cohort at the time of this study was around 60 students and she saw them face-to-face only twice each week, "so communication is quite vital". There was some initial frustration however, as her teaching colleague did not have the Facebook Messenger app which meant Trish was left to manage the page on her own. After some negotiation a system was devised that was acceptable to both tutors in the teaching team, and Trish communicated with

about "85–90% of students" using the Messenger app, her colleague communicating the same information to the remaining students either face-to-face or via email.

5.2. The interviews

Participants responses gathered from the semi-structured interviews were themed under headings and are developed further in the discussion below. In an endeavour to stay true to their voices the comments are grouped according to the patterns which became apparent during the thematic analysis of the raw data.

6. Discussion

The contribution this study makes to the growing field of online communication in the tertiary sector is to share a snapshot of the pros and cons encountered by a particular sample group in a single organisation. While clearly this cannot be generalised across this sector, it is apparent from the congruities between the data reported here and conclusions reached by researchers reported in literature, that similar experiences abound. Seven themes were identified and are discussed in turn below.

6.1. Emoji use for shared understanding and common ground

If an education provider uses tools which afford non-verbal communication in social media, it is then essential to ensure users are speaking the same language. The users I refer to – the study participants and their peers – are both students and tutors in either tutor-student, or student-student communications. They are engaged participants in multi-modal messaging who may or may not actively generate messages, or respond to those of others, with emojis. What the responses from this small sample of students and tutors at my institution show, is the critical need for a shared understanding of how emojis are being used in an educational setting as an acknowledged form of communication (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010) and a 'common ground' as described by Kirkwood, Gutgold and Manley (2011).

This need for shared fluency further aligns with the notion of talking past each other, as described by Metge and Kinloch (1984). Of significance is that some of the participants were wary of responding to others online because they felt unsure of the meanings of various emojis, and were therefore not confident in using them, in effect distancing themselves from the class group in online communications. A telling remark from 19-year-old Poppy, where she claimed that emojis are being used with the same meaning simply because "even the mature ones…have reacted" is in stark contrast to the response by Andrew (tutor) who said he did not respond with emojis as he was nervous of "choosing the wrong one". One explanation here may be that Poppy is merely demonstrating the egocentrism of youth in her remark, an assumption that "everyone sees the world the same way I do" (O'Connor & Nikolic, 1990). Certainly differences in the perceived fluency of Emoji and emojis' use by participants in this study do appear to support the typical generational gap observed in previous studies (Vondervell, 2002).

6.2. Emojis as softeners and qualifiers

It is worth reiterating here the notion of emojis as the opportunity to incorporate non-verbal cues in online communications noted by participants in this study, as well as in the literature. Al Tawil (2019), for example, concludes that electronic communication, which includes the use of emojis, "helps fill out the visual and vocal void in the asynchronous, text-based online learning environment" (p. 5). The visual and vocal cues, that is, the non-verbal elements in communication, add layers of emotive expression, social connection and relationship building. In online communication, emoticons, and more recently emojis, stand in for facial expressions and body language to soften tone, unstiffen formal language (Evans, 2017; Lo, 2008) and add warmth (Marden et al., 2019). An example from the present study can be seen through the eyes of the 19-year-old student,

Poppy, who revealed that whenever a notification "pops up" on her phone or laptop from the class page, she believed the likes and love heart emoji responses being used meant that "all the students love it (the post). The thing with these emojis, it lets us see how we're all feeling and that's amazing."

In a tertiary education setting, this is important: the transition to higher education for many students can be daunting, and entails a change of both academic and social culture (Cook & Leckey, 1999). New students, quite naturally, may be unfamiliar with terminology and processes, concerned about different teaching styles and intimidated by workload, worried about letting themselves and family down, and unsure of how to relate to peers, lecturers and tutors (Fraser & Hendren, 2003). Research by Lynch et al. (2006) established that the first few weeks especially are critical, and well recognised as a "make or break" period. First impressions count, and forming positive, friendly relationships is crucial. Both tutors recognised that using emojis could "soften the blow", as Andrew put it, and Poppy noted how a peer used emojis in her post asking for notes from a missed lecture, to emphasise her shyness and humility in asking, rather than risk an impression of appearing demanding.

6.3. Meanings and perceptions, and the issue of ambiguity

A further area of congruency with most of the literature in this arena relates to the definitional ambiguity of emojis, which by their very nature convey a continuously evolving, amorphous character and value rather than a fixed, dictionary-based definition (Evans, 2017). While the participants agreed that they shared a common understanding of the meanings of the 12 emojis shown them, the data indicated that this was not actually the case and immediately gives rise to the possibility that shared understanding is erroneously assumed. If the emojis, and no doubt others not discussed in this study, are not being understood in the same way, the participants are clearly not speaking in the same 'wordless tongue' (Sternbergh, 2014).

An example of the above point was indicated via some ambiguity in the meaning of both thumb emojis. The blue thumbs up Facebook 'like' response (#6) and the skin coloured thumbs up (#8) were seen by some as interchangeable. Others believed they were confident in their understanding of the difference between these two emojis and used them differently, the blue emoji to simply acknowledge that a post had been seen, the skin coloured one to indicate a positive response to the post. In addition, the meanings of the grimacing face (#4) and the loudly crying face (#10) were highly contestable. When the original intent and meaning of these as described by Facebook (Unicode, 2018) was conveyed to student and tutor participants, some reacted with great surprise saying they used these two emojis interchangeably to express strong feelings of fear, anger, misery and devastation. Others saw them quite differently and used them to indicate mild disappointment, though one participant said the grimacing face was "almost happy" and had an air of barely contained excitement. They began to question and worry about how they had used them in the past, and how their responses were received. Others were more nonchalant about using the emojis with the original intent, indicating that they perceive emojis as somewhat trivial. For these participants, commitment to using emojis was lower and sometimes more ad hoc than for those who felt more confident in their use. Possibly such communicators may not see emojis as serious or important elements of sending a message, their responses merely token, as suggested by Stevanovic and Koski (2018) who propose that there are variations to the intersubjective processes as communication unfolds online, or face-to-face.

6.4. Systems of communication, perspectives and professionalism

As responsible tertiary education practitioners, we must be aware of a possible lack of shared understanding of visual clues and social triggers when communicating on institution-approved Social Networking Sites (Kehrwald, 2008) and be prepared to mitigate the effects of possible misunderstandings or intervene if necessary. Findings showed that the three thematic influences

of Emoji fluency, playing it safe, and perspectives on professionalism were influential in individuals either not responding with emojis, or showing a very limited response using only the universally understood smiley face. These influences recall the notion of transactional distance that Davis et al. (2010) use to describe the 'distance' between participants in any communication exchange, and how this can be either highlighted or reduced through a variety of mechanisms.

Some of the participants claimed not to use emojis and cited a number of reasons. While I did not directly ask if they consciously and deliberately did not respond with emojis in online class communications, some clearly chose to refrain, particularly those from the mature age brackets. While Poppy felt all fellow students in her class group were competent emoji users, comments by tutors and mature students were indicative of a more cautious approach which suggests that their not responding with emojis might be more to do with maturity, life experience and employment status, than age alone. An example of this might be due to the professionalism expected of a tutor; both self-imposed as indicated by Andrew, and at a more formal level, as indicated by Trish who was told by her manager to refrain from signing off emails with crosses to represent kisses. This lends import to the need for institutions to be in tune with just what the perspectives and expectations of teachers/peers are (Forbes, 2012).

6.5. Emojis as a group barometer

As the interviews showed, another point of shared understanding between tutors and students was that the responses within the Facebook groups in some way indicated how the student group was feeling. While the tutors reported that they felt by using emojis sparingly, their communication was somehow safer, this could possibly be perceived as 'lurking' (Bishop, 2014), a not entirely positive term used in Internet culture to describe the ability of a member of an online community to observe without participating. Alternatively, the minimal use of emojis by tutors could be interpreted as an example of "standing back and standing by to signal presence" (p. 7), as described by Forbes and Gedera (2019) in their research into misunderstandings between tertiary teachers and students in online discussions.

Andrew said that though he did not often respond with emojis, watching the posts and interactions by the students provided a gauge of class atmosphere. He looks at the context, the thread of the conversation and other responses, considers his knowledge of the student who posted and acts to resolve any issue:

> *Yesterday I posted this message about the computers being wiped – and there were these grumpy face emojis in response. The students weren't happy at all, of course they weren't, so I followed up with another post to explain further.*

Online behaviours are not just about age, or professionalism – they are also about personality and interpersonal skills and proficiency. In a verbal exchange, the lack of response and/or engagement by a participant in a conversation is possibly more immediately picked up on than in an online forum, where the participant may quite simply have gone offline, or switched to another conversation, app or platform altogether. One of the mature students, Donald, felt his withholding of emoji responses was his way of showing his disapproval and his disinterest to his fellow students, but did anyone actually notice, or care?

6.6. Emoji fluency and how it affects use

An important qualification is that this non-verbal conveying of responses only applies if the communicators are speaking the same 'language'. Given the reactions and responses of participants in the current study, we can certainly see they are using emojis as a way to compensate for the lack of interpersonal, visual non-verbal cues in their Facebook group exchanges. In the forum the students and tutors are members of, my findings show that while there have been some fun and interesting uses and exchanges involving emojis, the quick click responses are not always being

received and understood in the same way within these groups. In their 2010 study of intersubjectivity, Gillespie and Cornish (2010) proposed that we may assume shared understanding between contributing parties in a computer-mediated-conversation if there is agreement of the subject, text and emojis being inserted. This was not always clear in my research, where understanding of emoji intention was assumed until I probed further and teased out underlying sub-contexts in meanings in various exchanges. There appeared to be a diversity in the participants' perceptions of their own fluency in both understanding what symbols to use when, and reading and interpreting messages. It appeared that there was some sense of exclusion felt by individuals in the classroom Facebook groups which was indicated by their lack of engagement in posts. There was no perception of any negativity associated with this, or that they were being deliberately left out, rather that they didn't post because of their own lack of confidence in their emoji use and knowledge of perceived etiquette connected to using emojis.

6.7. Playing it safe

Similar to research by Novak et.al. (2015), the clear outcome from this project was that the most frequently used emojis are positive, which is encouraging for both the tutors and the institution. As student participant Evie noted, this is "a safe option, you're not taking sides or offending anyone, but you are acknowledging you understand". The tutors, although personally less likely to use emojis, absolutely recognised the value of emojis for signalling understanding and engagement, and the affordance they offered to gauge the atmosphere of the class dynamic. The findings of this study, then, are less about who was communicating online in class, and more about which emojis were in play. As reported earlier, there was an abundant use of the smiling face (#1), and the thumbs up (#6) in both class groups by students. This indicated that the post was seen and students were giving support in some way.

The notion of Discourse as proposed by Gee (2008) is evident too, demonstrated by the use of this technological medium which enables specific ways of acting and feeling to enact the highly recognisable social activity of communicative exchanges within a class group. An example of this may be seen when Trish, in her role as tutor, felt responsible for protecting a student with a likely 'crush' on a classmate from being teased or even ridiculed by her peers because of her emoji use. Given that all participants in this study believed that the red love heart (#5) should only be used with those whom you are particularly close to, or intimate with, we may assume that this was a general class consensus. This interpretation was supported when other students responded to the conversation thread by adding sideways laughing faces. Overall, the exchange had become more social and less scholarly; Trish's intervention moved the communication back to a more focused class discussion, and likely protected the credibility of the red love heart user within the class group.

Discourse as a concept promotes the need for an awareness for all to deal with multi-modal texts, non-verbal symbols and the technology they are supported by. Perhaps the red heart responder was choosing not to decode the unfolding implications (Locke, 2004) her responses were creating. As with any kind of communication exchange, relying on feedback is important in maintaining a harmonious atmosphere, preserving self-presentation (Livingstone, 2008) and negotiating co-constructed meanings that result from the power of both author and reader (Williams & Mehrten, 2008). In my discussions about this occurrence with Trish, she conveyed that she believed the student was possibly hopeful that only the person she was responding to would notice her intent. Reviewing these interpretations as she shared this incident, Trish feels that she was correct to carefully manage the situation, monitor the group barometer, and caution the student to avoid such mis-steps in future.

While the incident of the red love heart (#5) may at face value be simply one of a student making use of the widely recognised symbol of love to test the waters by showing her affection for another, it raises the issue of protocols around class communication. In her study on participant perspectives informing pedagogy for asynchronous online discussion, Forbes (2012, p. 163)

found that students were clear that they expected their lecturers to be present and participate online, as they would in a physical classroom, and that their online 'silence' represented absence. However, in the Facebook class groups in this research, it appears that because their purpose was primarily to facilitate communication dealing with such matters as room re-scheduling, notes, resources, checking on hand-in dates and attendance, the student participants were not as concerned with tutors' interactions. Yes, they wanted answers but they were happy to receive them from their peers.

7. Conclusions

The rich data gathered from the two tutors and four students who contributed to this study has raised many interesting issues, and shed light on some of the more nuanced, intangible elements of non-verbal, non-semantic communication, which it can be all too easy to assume is not present in online mediums. Certainly for myself, and participants Trish and Andrew as teachers, it has raised awareness about a number of assumptions, such as students all being equally fluent, and sharing an understanding of the intent behind apparently simple little graphics – like a smiley face, a heart, or a thumbs up. The opportunity to question participants, and then to probe their responses further, requiring them to reflect and critically question their own assumptions, has shown how complex communicating with emojis can be.

The primary research question which guided this study asked what the key pros, cons and implications for emoji use in online communication were. In general, the benefits to using Emoji in online fora include their affordance as 'softeners' and 'qualifiers', the sense of extending friendliness, welcome and personality to an impersonal learning environment, and their ability to harness and foster a shared understanding. Drawbacks include definitional ambiguity, the continually evolving usage and layers of meaning, and the risk of appearing unprofessional – all of which are affected by variable user fluency.

Most important, however, is what these findings mean for practitioners. A number of implications for effective teaching practice were identified, which would be useful beyond the programmes covered in this inquiry. Most significant is the need for action and engagement, rather than the opposite. Not addressing the presence and use of emojis in the education environment would be a naïve approach. Emojis are here to stay and by learning to speak Emoji in the same contextual manner as our students, tutors can harness them as relevant, useful and purposeful additions to the student-student and student-tutor communications which are part of our everyday role. We need to educate and support students by embracing the tools they appear to be happy to use, rather than risk them thinking that any aspect of their communication is invalid or inappropriate.

A second implication arising from this study is the danger of assuming shared understanding across a student cohort. Subsidiary research questions sought to answer how the 12 most commonly used emojis in Facebook Messenger were understood by tutors and students, and how effective their use was. The answer was – variably. In our classrooms we have a diverse student body, including mature students, international students, second-chance learners, and students with variable levels of digital fluency. While an investigation of use by sub-groups such as these was out of the scope for this study, even the four students who participated here demonstrated a disparity of fluency and enthusiasm for emoji use, from Poppy who uses "them in everything, all the time", to Donald, who eschews them for what he sees as shallowness. When participants were given the opportunity to reflect and think aloud about what they thought individual emojis meant, comments such as 'context'; 'answers vary'; and 'really have to think hard' indicated that incorporating emojis with text was no guarantee of ensuring the original intent of a message was received and understood.

Staff developers and educational technology experts would be sensible to consciously convey good practice through example and instruction, so that teachers are at least aware of this new

cyberspace language. After all, teachers are the first line monitors of class communication appropriateness and etiquette; a relative level of fluency will help them understand how students are using emojis, in order to interact effectively and positively as role models. Staff development processes, such as induction, would be an ideal avenue to introduce, and practice, the various styles and tools of online discourse.

8. Reflections and recommendations

The considerations above indicate the need for ongoing research, taking note of what initiatives work best, and how the different stakeholders feel about their role as interpreters, arbiters and disseminators of Emoji. There may be an argument for accepting that the conversations and emoji use in social networking sites (SNSs) would be different if tutors did not have access to them and that parallel pages may offer some advantages. However, whether this would defeat the purpose of these class Facebook groups, or empower the students to manage their own interpersonal relationships should be considered.

Given the variances in fluency and understanding, institutions must carefully consider to what extent they have a responsibility to make sure their students can use emojis proficiently, safely and with shared meaning. I suggest a need for a wider institutional duty of care that calls for a student handbook, a guidelines document, or a policy on class communication protocols. This should entail working with students to establish guidelines for online discussions, and perhaps including or excluding certain emojis which may be perceived differently, to facilitate a shared understanding of appropriacy of use and awareness of others' perceptions. Or, as an alternative to an organisation-wide approach, negotiating a set of guidelines for class emoji use as part of class communication protocols, may be a way of achieving this.

Proposed areas for future research could include, but not be limited to the place of emojis in education, with consideration of what extent an educational institution has a responsibility to make sure students and tutors can use emojis proficiently, safely and with shared meaning. Another area to consider is the institution working with students to establish guidelines for online discussions with approved group membership.

A limitation of the study was the make-up of the participants. In an ideal world I would have had representation from a younger tutor, and/or a mature female student and younger male student. Further to this, representation from an international student would have added another layer of perception. However, in keeping with the methodology I recruited those who first responded. The study was not intended to generalise.

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