Engaging ESL Students by Online Discussion Forum and Gamification: Teaching Social Sciences to BA Students in a Chinese Transnational University in the Covid-19 Context

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Abstract
In recent years, transnational education (TNE) has seen a surge in numbers across the world and especially in Asian countries. Although student participation is underlined in TNE universities, it can be difficult to achieve due to local students’ lack of confidence in English speaking and other locally socio-cultural reasons. Reflecting on the author’s teaching practice in a TNE university based in China for two years, this paper discusses the use and value of combining online forum discussion (ODF) with gamification to engage English-as-second-language (ESL) students in a BA-level social sciences module. Combining qualitative in-depth interviews, longitudinal observation and quantitative data analysis, the research explores students’ motivations for ODF participation, the contribution of ODF to classroom discussion, as well as the correlation between class participation (including ODF participation) and academic performance. It argues that instructors’ facilitation, involvement and the establishment of a learning community are pre-conditions for an active discussion forum to take place, which in turn improves ESL students’ class participation and strengthens a sense of connection particularly valuable in the current context of Covid-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, gamification mechanism such as badges and rewards can help to maintain students’ engagement and meet their desire for recognition. In addition, ODF participation is found positively correlated with a student’s academic performance on a statistically significant level.

Keywords
Student participation, discussion forum, gamification, Chinese students, transnational education, technology enhanced learning

1. Introduction
The internationalization of higher education since the new millennium has been accompanied by an influx of Chinese students to Western universities (Burrows, 2016) as well as transnational universities that offer programmes taught in English in non-Western countries (Healey, 2014). Educators write about the challenge of engaging Chinese students who appear to be passive and unresponsive learners, only valuing the teacher’s opinion (see Burrows, 2016 for a review). The mismatch between Chinese students’ learning style and the active and participatory learning and teaching
advocated by Western pedagogy (Advance HE, 2019) is understandable given their general lack of confidence in English proficiency and long-time exposure to the behaviorist educational model which expects little contribution from the student’s side (Wilson & Peterson, 2006). The development of technology enhanced learning (TEL) provides a promising way to engage Chinese and other ESL (English as second language) students. In particular, online discussion forum (ODF)—“the asynchronous exchange of messages using electronic bulletin boards” (Knowlton & Knowlton, 2001, p. 39)—and gamification, defined as “the application of game design elements to non-game activities” (Nah, Zeng, Telaprolu, Ayyappa, & Eschenbrenner, 2014), have been widely used and discussed regarding their pedagogical value (Campbell, 2007; Hirata & Hirata, 2013; Fu, Lin, Hwang, & Zhang, 2020; Hirata & Hirata, 2013; Lin, Hwang, Fu, & Chen, 2018; Lin, Hwang, Fu, & Cao, 2020; Menkhoff & Bengtsson, 2012).

However, the related pedagogical research is largely informed by higher education of business, STEM and language teaching. In what ways TEL can facilitate ESL students’ engagement in the learning and teaching of humanities and social sciences (HSS) remain under-addressed. Apart from combing English speaking with logical reasoning, ESL students of HSS also need to think, discuss and write in a highly critical, sociological and theoretical manner. This essay is based on a pedagogical action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Norton, 2009) which evaluates my teaching practice of combining ODF with gamification to improve student participation in a Year 2 BA theory-based module on digital media and communication studies. It was set in a TNE university based in China, which offers UK-accredited programmes to students who come from China and other Asian, African and East-European countries. More than 90% of the student body is Chinese while the ongoing pandemic has affected almost all international students’ access to the campus. In my case, only one international student (Australian) attended the module onsite; the rest of onsite students are all Chinese (152 in total), together with six international students studying remotely from Indonesia, South Korea and Cameroon.

As my university largely adopts the British educational system, each module is delivered in the format of weekly lectures and seminars. For the latter, students are expected to take an active role in classroom discussion but their participation has remained an issue university wide. To improve student engagement, I had already tried ODF to complement classroom teaching and learning since I joined the university. Yet, it was not effective (i.e. low ODF participation rate) until the Covid-19 outbreak led to complete online education in China in the first half of 2020. Since then, I have been practicing and developing the combination of ODF with gamification—awarding participating students with weekly virtual badges which can lead to certain rewards in the end—in my modules even if onsite teaching and learning has largely resumed in China. In the second semester of the academic year 2020-2021, this practice worked particularly well to engage students in the module I taught. The weekly discussion forum was so active that I hired teaching assistants to respond to the students’ posts together with me; and around one third of the students frequently contributed to the learning and teaching process. Based on focus groups and text-based in-depth interviews with the students, this paper explores their motivations for ODF participation, the kind of feedback they hoped to obtain, the contribution of gamification to sustaining their interest, and the interactions between forum discussion and classroom discussion.

Through quantitative data, I also identify the positive correlation between ODF participation and academic performance for the module.

The paper argues that discussion forum, only when being carefully designed and facilitated, can improve ESL students’ class participation and provide a sense of connection and learning community which is particularly valuable in the current context of Covid-19 pandemic as numerous students are forced to study remotely and remain isolated. In addition, gamification mechanism can trigger and maintain students’ engagement and meet their desire for recognition. My student respondents’ yearnings for recognition and connection in class participation resonate with Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs. That is, the sense of belonging and self-esteem pave ways for creativity and self-actualization which are essential for active and collaborative learning to take place.

The paper contributes to pedagogical literature by first providing a concrete experience of combining ODF and gamification as two important TEL tools to improve ESL students’ and particularly Chinese students’ engagement in learning social sciences in a transnational HE setting. It also sheds light on the apparent puzzle regarding students’ lower participation in ODF despite its various pedagogical benefits (Schier & Curtin, 2009; Sloan, 2011; Yang et al., 2007) by emphasizing instructors’ facilitation, involvement and the establishment of a learning community as pre-conditions for an active ODF to take place. Lastly, the paper offers some concrete suggestions for educators to facilitate students’ forum discussion online, to integrate forum discussion and classroom discussion, and for educational developers to enhance the interface of e-learning platforms.

Below, I first review existing literature on the variety of pedagogical benefits of ODF, student motivation (and the lack of it) to participate in forum discussion, and the usefulness of gamification in educational settings. Then I briefly explain the measures I took to improve student participation and the methods of my pedagogical research, followed by the discussion of major findings.
2. ODF: great potentials but lower-than-expected student engagement

As a text-based and computer-mediated communication tool, online discussion forum (ODF) has been widely used in distant education and increasingly integrated into on-site educational settings as well (Xie et al., 2006). ODF extends the traditional classroom time and space, bringing about a variety of benefits for learners. Through ODF, class members can continue to discuss topics, establish and maintain a learning community outside of the classroom (Murphey, 2004). In this way, collaborative learning, a process of peer interaction that is mediated and structured by the teacher (Wilson & Peterson, 2006), can be promoted. As students have more time to do research and then formulate and share their responses to a given topic, ODF has the potential to “enable higher level learning to take place” (Kanuka, 2005) that involves more sophisticated reasoning. By keeping a text-based digital record, it also allows students to elaborate and reflect on their thoughts in a more formal format which “may foster their metacognitive and critical thinking skills.” (Xie et al., 2006, p. 68).

Furthermore, the asynchronous feature of ODF helps to make student participation not only more flexible but also more equal. This is because ODF can “bring ESL students out of their shells” (Campbell, 2007) who may otherwise remain silent in the classroom for various reasons in international and transnational HE settings. In particular, classroom discussion and debate may be an alien concept for Asian ESL students, including Chinese students, who come from cultural and educational backgrounds that downplay, if not disapproving, face-to-face arguing (Warden et al., 2005; Burrows, 2016). With the facilitation of ODF, some educators found that Asian students were more involved in discussion with native English speakers and with each other (Campbell, 2007; Chan, 2010; Hirata & Hirata, 2013).

However, the variety of benefits of ODF can only be utilized to its full potential when students indeed engage with it, which is nonetheless not guaranteed. Anecdotal evidence indicates that student participation rate for ODF is oftentimes lower than educators’ expectation (Yang et al., 2007), especially in the first weeks of a semester (Thomas, 2002; Sloan, 2011). Some educators even report an ODF engagement rate as low as two out of 140 (Schier & Curtin, 2009), which resonates with my own initial attempt to integrate ODF into my teaching two years ago. Before I introduced gamification and spent a substantial amount of time in facilitating ODF discussion and providing feedback, some discussion forums I created in the virtual learning and teaching platform of my university received almost no student participation and I was not alone. Most of my colleagues stopped utilizing ODF after several fruitless attempts or merely used it to address students’ questions about summative assignments as if that was the only attractive topic for students.

While ODF participation might be hindered by learners’ lack of digital access and skill in the early 2000s (Salmon, 2002), the influence of technical difficulty steadily diminishes with further development of the internet and e-learning tools. The apparent contradiction between the great potentials of ODF for student engagement and lower-than-expected student participation rate leads to numerous research that addresses students’ motivation, or the lack of it, for ODF engagement (e.g. Hew & Chen, 2010s; Mason, 2011; Sloan, 2015; Xie et al., 2006; Yang et al., 2007). Most of these researches adopt the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) developed by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000), to which the next section turns.

3. Bridging intrinsic and extrinsic motivations

Self-determination theory proposes that human behavior is driven by motivation that ranges from intrinsic to extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation refers to “doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable” while extrinsic motivation refers to “doing something because it produces a separable outcome” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 55), such as grades, rewards, regulation, peer pressure, etc. The notion of intrinsic motivation resonates with “creativity and self-actualization” that ranks highest in Maslow’s (1970) famous model of the hierarchy of human needs. For him, the gratification of needs at lower levels, notably belongingness and self-esteem, are preconditions for the need of “creativity and self-actualization” to emerge. Applied to the context of ODF, it means an active online discussion forum presupposes students’ confidence and connection with others as well as the teacher. Applying Self-Determination Theory to ODF participation, Sloan (2015) argues that in order for students to become self-motivated, three psychological needs should be met: relatedness, competence and autonomy. That is to say, students need to find discussion forum meaningful to their learning process and relatable to their own experiences. They also need to feel capable to answer an ODF topic, yet not being forced to participate or to discuss it in constrained ways.

It should be noted that according to Deci and Ryan (2000), intrinsic and extrinsic motivations interact with each other to promote or undermine one’s intrinsic motivation in different contexts. Although some educators question the effectiveness of simply relying on extrinsic motivation (such as course assessment) to improve ODF participation (Lee & Martin, 2017; Xie et al., 2006), internal and external motivations can be integrated since human beings are social beings. Someone’s personal identity, which largely informs intrinsic motivation, is shaped by his/her identification with certain...
social groups cognitively, emotionally and evaluatively (Kumi & Sabherwal, 2019). This is why numerous researchers who study students’ motivation for ODF participation point out the importance for instructors to establish a learning community or “community of inquiry” (Lee & Martin, 2017, p. 150) where group norms can serve to motivate students. Establishing and maintaining this community demands instructors’ active attitude and commitment to ODF which includes careful design, timely facilitation and feedback as well as their explicit encouragement and explanation of the value of ODF (Lee & Matin, 2017; Sloan, 2015; Xie et al., 2006; Yang et al., 2007). The friendly and trusting environment helps students to develop a sense of connection and belonging which is found to be positively associated with their online participation in learning and teaching (Kumi & Sabherwal, 2019). All these factors help to bridge students’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, achieving what Deci and Ryan call “integrated regulation”: student feels that engaging in a required or suggested learning task “is congruent with his/her personal values and senses of self.” (Xie et al., 2006, p. 69). It is precisely to combining students’ internal and external motivations that the gamification of education can contribute (Muntean, 2011).

4. Gamification as a trigger and a reminder for student participation

Gamification, defined as “the application of game design elements to non-game activities”, has been applied to a variety of contexts including education since the late 2000s (Nah et al., 2014). For the educational context, Kapp’s (2012) definition is particularly useful: “using game-based mechanics, aesthetics, and game thinking to engage people, motivate action, promote learning and solve problems.” (Cited in Miller, 2013, p. 196). While game-based mechanics and thinking have been increasingly adopted by educators to engage students, the issue of game-based aesthetics, as will be mentioned below in my research findings, is also worth attention of TEL designers and developers.

Gamification is widely used in online remote education because one of its major limitations is the lack of emotional interaction between students and teachers, if any (Muntean, 2011). Gamification helps to tackle this limitation by providing immediate and personalized recognition to learners’ progress in the forms of level/stages and progress bar—for example, “you have reached another level”, “you have unlocked another task”, etc. In addition, (virtual) badges can serve as “a mark of appreciation or task accomplishment during the process of goal achievement” (Nah et al., 2014, p. 405). Badges can thus be combined with another common form of gamification—prizes and rewards, the use of which has been found effective in motivating learners (ibid, p. 406). If a learner is enabled to adopt a virtual character in learning, the rewards can be a character upgrade. Another gamification mechanism for education is storyline which allows the learner’s virtual character to solve problems in certain contexts and thus putting learning content into practice. This strategy has been proved particularly useful to engage ESL students in learning English grammar and business writing (Fu, Lin, Hwang, & Zhang, 2020; Lin, Hwang, Fu, & Chen, 2018; Lin, Hwang, Fu, & Cao, 2020).

Writing about the contribution of gamification to education, Muntean (2011) draws on Fogg’s (2009) behavior model and argues that motivation and ability alone are not enough to determine a behavior; it also needs a trigger, “something to tell the user to complete the action in a certain moment.” Even if someone is both motivated and capable to participate in certain activities, they may appear less appealing over a longer period of time. But combining these mundane activities into a gaming narrative creates an effective way to sustain people’s interest in participation (Miller, 2013). In this sense, gamification can function as both a spark that motivates people and a reminder for people who have both ability and motivation to take actions (Muntean, 2011).

Designing a specific game that allows students to adopt a virtual character and solve problems in a storytelling context demands a substantial amount of resource. This is most of the time not possible for a specific module. Nonetheless, gamification can still be achieved by enabling students to maintain a sense of progression throughout the learning process which eventually leads to certain symbolic rewards. This is what I have been doing since the Covid-19 outbreak.

5. Discussion forum, badges, cat videos and cookies

The sudden outbreak of Covid-19 in early 2020 forced teaching and learning to take place completely online for a whole semester. My university quickly adopted the virtual classroom software BigBlueButton (BBB) but its connection was initially not stable. Furthermore, the majority of students were reluctant to join a virtual classroom audially and speak; instead, they preferred typing in the chat box. This limits the depth and the efficiency of virtual classroom discussion, especially for seminars. I therefore decided to substitute synchronous online seminars with asynchronous forum discussions where students could take more time to reflect on and elaborate their thoughts with regard to the two or three topics each week. The weekly discussion forum is embedded in the virtual learning teaching platform of our university comparable to Moodle (see Figure 1 for the interface of a weekly forum of my module). I would reply to each forum post individually when few students had contributed and then commented on four to five posts altogether when more emerged.

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To make participating students feel more engaged and encouraged, I also awarded them with a weekly participation badge and those who accumulated more than 8 (out of 12 in total) would receive a symbolic reward at the end of the semester. I eventually decided the reward as a zipped file of videos featuring my cat when he was a cute kitten. This was because, given the huge popularity of cats among the younger generations, I utilized a short cat video to attract students to do the informal quiz that helped to evaluate their knowledge of essential concepts and theories each week—they could only watch the video after doing the quiz. I also awarded those active students with a “module loyalty badge” featuring my cat (Figure 2) which served as the module mascot.

Figure 1. An illustration of my ODF interfaces.

Figure 2. “Module loyalty badge”.

All these measures were well received by the students. My module was mentioned several times by students as a good example of online teaching in our university newsletters for its high degree of student engagement and interactivity between the teacher and the students. I also felt deeply touched when seeing numerous students willing to express their thoughts in such depth that goes far beyond that of classroom discussion (see Figure 3). Twenty to thirty students (out of 111) participated in forum discussion before they became busy with assessments towards the end of the semester.
Given its relative success to engage students, I continued to combine ODF with gamification (in the form of badges and rewards) even after onsite teaching has mostly resumed in my university—it remains hybrid as international students are not able to come to China. For the module “Introduction to Digital Media and Communication” (module code: COM158), I would brief students with two or three topics that they could reflect upon and discuss in the weekly discussion forum before the seminar at the end of each lecture. These ODF topics were designed as related to those of the seminar so students could come more prepared to express their thoughts in English. I explicitly encouraged them to participate in forum discussion and would comment on some interesting posts in the class. I created three ODF groups each week in accordance with the three seminar groups. When the students became busier because of assessments in the later weeks of the semester and fewer posts were created, I merged the three groups into one.

Furthermore, students who participated in forum or classroom discussion (onsite or online) would gain a weekly participation badge, the image of which was catered to each week’s topic (see Figure 4 for an example). Collecting a certain number of badges (e.g. 8 out of 12) qualified a student to receive a symbolic reward in the last class. Since I am fond of baking, I brought home-made cookies to share with active participants of the module in the final lecture—this was made clear in the first class when I introduced the whole gamification mechanism. The fact that these cookies were homemade, not manufactured and purchased, triggered extra curiosity and motivation from some of the students (see more below).

![Figure 3. A student’s in-depth forum post.](image)

![Figure 4. This weekly badge fits the topic of digital media culture.](image)
The combination of ODF and gamification worked effectively to enhance student participation. Students created so many posts in the first several weeks that I hired two teaching assistants (postgraduate students) to help me facilitating the forum and providing feedback. Almost one third of the COM158 students participated in module discussion through forum and/or class contribution in the first half of the semester (see Figure 5) when they had few coursework deadlines. 37 out of 157 students received my cookies in the end as they collected two thirds (8 out of 12) of the weekly badges. In this way, I was able not only to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching regularly, but also co-construct knowledge with active module participants who were empowered and involved in their learning. The designs of some module readings and even one of the assessments were inspired by students’ posts.

Figure 5. An overview of the numbers of “COM158ers” who received the weekly badge in the first half of the module.

The relative success of my endeavor to engage students via ODF and gamification leads to a number of questions. First and foremost, what motivated students to participate in ODF as opposed to my initial failure? To what extent did the introduction of gamification make a difference? Second, successful as the COM158 discussion forums, I spent at least half a day each week in reading and responding to students’ posts. Therefore, I hoped to find out what kind of feedback the students looked for when participating in ODF so I can be more efficient and strategic in giving feedback in the future. Relatedly, I wondered to what extent the students appreciated TAs’ feedback and facilitation. Lastly, back to my original intention to improve their classroom participation and ultimately the learning outcomes, I would like to evaluate the connection between ODF discussion and classroom discussion, as well as the correlation between students’ ODF participation and academic performance.

6. Research methods

As the existing literature on ODF and gamification has shed few lights on the use and value of combining them to improve ESL students’ participation in transnational HE setting, this research largely adopts a qualitative approach (Gaskell, 2000) and combines focus group and individual interviews (Kvale, 2007; Lindolf & Taylor, 2002) to explore their diverse viewpoints and experiences. More specifically, in the final week, I conducted two focus groups which consisted of nine to ten students (all Chinese) and lasted around one hour and 15 minutes respectively. The focus group participation was voluntary as I posted an announcement and created two time slots for interested students to book themselves in. The majority of the focus group participants were active in the module forum discussion; two of them rarely participated in ODF, but being outspoken in class. The interview format was semi-structured and the topic guide is organised around the research questions, with an extra focus on the issue of students’ interaction in online forums. In addition, two students who were not available for the focus groups and four off-campus international students responded to the topic guide directly. These resulted in six text-based individual interviews in addition to the two focus groups.

In addition, after inputting the number of each student’s forum post(s) and module score in SPSS, I ran both Pearson-correlation test and single regression analysis to find out the correlation between these two variables. I also input the number of the participation badges that each student received which indicates his/her overall participation for the module. It is worth noting that I skipped those students who failed the modules to avoid data skewing. These students did not participate in either forum or classroom discussion.

1 The final assessment of COM158 required students to write an essay that critically engages with the Netflix documentary The Social Dilemma. The film was recommended by a student in her forum post.
This research entails some limitations. First, it gives more voice to active students of the module through qualitative interviews. The research findings are thus to be further generalized and enriched by quantitative survey that involves a more diverse student body. Second, since a participation badge was awarded to students who contributed to forum and/or classroom discussion, it is difficult to differentiate the two on retrospect. Therefore, the research cannot statistically analyze the correlation between forum discussion and classroom participation. Below, I first present research findings of the quantitative analysis.

7. Findings

As can be seen from Table 1, about 25% of the students who passed the module were constantly involved in the learning and teaching process of COM158 (indicated by the seven or more badges they received out of 12) while half of the student body participated either in class or forum at least twice. As for ODF participation, one fourth of the students who passed the module created at least four posts while half of them contributed to the weekly forum at least once.

Table 1. Summary of Students’ Forum Participations and the Numbers of Badges They Received

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistics</th>
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<td>N</td>
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The Pearson correlation tests between module score and “forum participation” and “participation in general” both identify a positive correlation at the 95% confidence level—0.215 and 0.265 respectively (one tailed). The single lineal regression analysis which treats a student’s module score as the dependent variable (see appendix 1) shows that a one-point increase in forum discussion (i.e. creating one more post) is expected for an increase in module score between 0.71 and 1.22 points (95% confidence interval). A one-point increase in class participation in general predicts a module score increase between 0.71 and 1.22 points (95% confidence interval).

It can thus be confirmed that, statistically speaking, more ODF participation and more class participation in general both tend to result in better academic performance of a student. The degree of improvement is moderate though—about 1 point. Furthermore, class participation in general, which includes ODF and/or classroom participation, has a stronger correlation with academic performance compared with ODF participation only.

Yet, the pedagogical value of ODF becomes more manifest when we look at the qualitative data derived from my interviews with the active (forum) participants of the module.

7.1 Student empowerment and engagement

Given that ODF participation was completely voluntary for COM158, it is hardly surprising that most interviewed students reported that they were more likely to respond to a forum topic when they found it interesting or related to their daily experiences—“when I feel I have much to say”, as one put it. Sue from South Korea said she would be more interested in participating if “I want to share examples of my country because I am an international student”. Here, it can be seen that ODF helps to achieve the empowerment and liberation of learners who take control over the learning process, as advocated by the humanistic pedagogy (Wilson & Peterson, 2006). The participants of one of the focus groups reached the consensus that they would be more interested in a forum topic that provides plenty of room for free exploration. A good example they mentioned in this regard is search engine biases for which they could type in what-

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2 All the names used in the report are pseudonyms.
ever keywords of their interests across different platforms. On the contrary, if they could more or less figure out what
the instructor expected them to say, their participation motivation would decrease especially when someone created a
comprehensive and thus conclusive post. Noticeably, the same focus group also mentioned that eloquent posts can lead
to peer pressure that discourages some of them from contributing, which is comparable with those who hold the floor in
the classroom. In this sense, setting a word limit for each ODF contribution is useful (Campbell, 2007).

By allowing students to apply knowledge basics to real-life experiences and phenomena, ODF can also boost their
self-esteem and bring them a sense of achievement. Susan mentioned that if she had done the weekly reading and followed
the lecture closely, she would be highly motivated to contribute to forum discussion because “it will be a pity if I
don’t apply what I have learned to reality.” Most respondents agreed that the existence of discussion forum helped them
to be better prepared for classroom participation in seminars because they could take more time to elaborate their
thoughts and organize their English expression. One respondent even claimed that she would definitely attend a seminar,
being ready to talk, when she had posted something in the forum. The positive contribution of ODF for facilitating
classroom discussion can thus be observed. In addition, two students mentioned their motivation of practicing English
writing, verbalizing and recording their thoughts through ODF participation. ODF thus provides an extra opportunity for
ESL students to improve their English for academic purposes in a formative manner.

Apart from the individualized motivations summarized so far, many respondents reported that they utilized the
weekly discussion forum to share their thoughts and learn from each other, as well as to gain informal recognition from
instructors.

7.2 ODF participation for connection and recognition

The motivation for connection is clearly expressed by the international students who have to study remotely and re-
main separated from the main student body onsite. Coming from Indonesia, Vivian makes a somewhat poignant com-
ment which demonstrates the sense of connection or community that ODF can provide: “if I can have a way to know
what other students think and feel, that made me feel a whole lot better even when I cannot be physically pre-
sent.” Vivian’s comment is echoed by Samuel who struggled to attend classes on time due to the time difference be-
 tween China and Cameroon. For him, reading others’ posts offered a more efficient way to grasp the major themes of
each week compared with merely watching an entire lecture on his own. All these international students’ acknowledg-
ment of the value of ODF for connecting the personal to the communal illustrates the social aspect of learning and
the necessity to address it by appropriate pedagogical means such as ODF. This necessity has become even more im-
perative under the current circumstance of Covid-19 outbreak which forces numerous learners to study alone.

The motivation for connection and the acknowledgement of ODF’s value to maintain a learning community were even more highlighted by onsite Chinese students. One of the focus groups reached the consensus that COM158, as the only module they took that had a discussion forum each week, provided them with a sense of community which is rare
in our university and thus cherished by them. They brought up the notion of banji (class) that exists in Chinese public
universities—that the same group of students go to different classes together for several years. For them, COM158 to
some extent brought them a sense of banji as they continued discussing common topics via ODF and a WeChat3 group
I created for the module outside class hours. This finding resonates with some pedagogical literature that identifies the
importance of group settings for Chinese learners (Burrows, 2016).

The students participated in ODF for recognition as well as for connection. This kind of recognition does not mean
formal grading, but informal encouragement and formative feedback which, for both of the focus groups, is again rare
and precious in our university. In this sense, as pointed out by previous research (Lee & Martin, 2017; Mason, 2011;
Sloan, 2015; Xie et al., 2006), instructors’ involvement is strongly correlated with the activeness of an ODF for peda-
gogical purposes. While ODF can bring students a sense of connection and recognition, their participation interest also
presupposes teachers’ acknowledgment of their contributions and the establishment of a friendly learning environment.

7.3 Instructors’ involvement and feedback

A recent email from a student who took my module in the online-teaching-only semester demonstrates the mutual
connection between instructors’ involvement and the sense of achievement that an active ODF can bring to students
(see Figure 6). The student obtained a great sense of achievement by participating in the ODF each week and collecting
all the badges. Yet, she “preserved” not only because she found the discussion topics interesting and “worth analysing”,
but also because of my constant acknowledgement of and feedback to students’ posts.

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3 One of the most popular social media and online chat tools in China.
The Educational Review, USA

Figure 6. A screenshot of a student's positive feedback for ODF and badges.

This point is confirmed by most of my interviewees who admitted that they would be much less likely to participate in ODF if there was no feedback from either the module leader or the TAs. Only two students who were highly self-motivated said they would continue to participate so as to practice English writing and record their own thoughts. Here again, we see the importance of combining students’ internal and external motivations for ODF participation. As both Susan and Vivian mention, they hoped to see the instructors’ feedback on the relevance or correctness of their contribution, without which they would lose much of the enthusiasm of participating. As for the specific type of feedback they look for, my respondents reported hoping to see positive and constructive feedback that corrects or enriches their posts, especially comments that point out a new direction for discussion and research. More feedback of this kind can make forum discussion more open and less conclusive, but it also demands a substantial amount of time and energy from the instructors.

My respondents recognized the improbability for the module leader to respond to each post individually, thus appreciating my practice of hiring TAs to interact with them. In terms of TAs’ feedback, it is noticeable that the theme of connection is brought up again. Both focus groups expressed their preference for my feedback not simply because the teacher might provide more professional comments, but also due to a sense of “strangeness”. Because I did not ask the postgraduate TAs to attend lectures or seminars, they appeared to be “distant” to students, especially those who attended class onsite. Several students even claim that they felt “a bit disappointed” and “discouraged” when they saw TAs, rather than the module leader, responding to their posts. This is an important finding for both my future teaching practice and other educators who consider utilizing ODF to improve student participation while at the same time looking for strategic ways to respond. TAs can be involved in giving feedback but they need to be more connected with students in the first place.

Furthermore, one of the focus groups emphasized that they actively participated in ODF because they felt “safe” with the “friendly” class vibe and would like to “reciprocate” my dedication to teaching. It can thus be seen that the sense of connection and belonging demands instructors’ involvement and enthusiasm about teaching, whilst the pre-establishment of a learning community is essential for an active ODF. This also helps to explain my international students’ relatively low participation rate of ODF given that they are physically absent and little connected with the rest of the class. In fact, the interviewed international students admitted that they read others’ posts more than creating their own’s.

The screenshot above (Figure 6) also indicates another effective yet much less time-consuming way for instructors to recognize students’ ODF participation—gamification in the form of badges, to which the next section turns.

7.4 “Once I started, I could not stop”

Table 2 summarizes the numbers and the corresponding percentages of students who received the COM158 participation badges (12 in total). Noticeably, the number of students who collected all the badges rank the fourth highest as opposed to the very small number of students who just lacked one or two badges. As Yuri put it vividly: “once I started, I could not stop. I wanted to collect all the badges.” The existence of the badge mechanism and its connection with an ultimate reward arguably triggers and maintains some students’ ODF and classroom participations. When some of the respondents did not have time to create a post, they reported that they would “use the shortcut” of speaking up in the classroom. Wenwen, a student who “was too lazy to create a post” but would like to taste my cookie said she would
make sure she participated in the classroom discussion each week to gain the weekly badge. Here, the combination of ODF and gamification helps to boost some ESL students’ classroom participation by making it appear somewhat “easier”.

| Table 2. A Breakdown of Student Percentages for Earning Different Numbers of Badges |
|---------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Frequency | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
| 0.00 | 39 | 27.7 | 27.7 |
| 1.00 | 21 | 14.9 | 42.6 |
| 2.00 | 13 | 9.2 | 51.8 |
| 3.00 | 6 | 4.3 | 56.0 |
| 4.00 | 8 | 5.7 | 61.7 |
| 5.00 | 8 | 5.7 | 67.4 |
| 6.00 | 9 | 6.4 | 73.8 |
| 7.00 | 7 | 5.0 | 78.7 |
| 8.00 | 6 | 4.3 | 83.0 |
| 9.00 | 8 | 5.7 | 88.7 |
| 10.00 | 4 | 2.8 | 91.5 |
| 11.00 | 2 | 1.4 | 92.9 |
| 12.00 | 10 | 7.1 | 100.0 |
| Total | 141 | 100.0 | |

For many respondents, the badges and the cookie both serve as “a sort of memoir” for the module that symbolizes teacher’s recognition of their effort and contribution. The customization of badges in accordance with each week’s topics reinforced these students’ interest in “badge collection” and the sense of accomplishment. In this sense, gamification indeed helps to combine students’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Muntean, 2011) for forum and/or classroom participation. But just as indicated by the students’ particular enthusiasm about homemade cookies, gamification needs to be carefully designed and endowed with a sense of humanistic connection. Wenwen said that it was less the cookie itself that she cared so much about than the emotional bonding between students and teachers embodied by a teacher’s homemade cookie which is rare in higher education.

7.5 Some Tips for educators and education developers

Based on the students’ feedback, the last section of the research findings offers some concrete tips for educators and education developers regarding the utilization of ODF and gamification to engage (ESL) students in higher education.

First of all, while the positive contribution of ODF discussion to classroom participation has been enunciated, one of my participants mentioned the possibility of boredom and demotivation to participate in class if he had already elaborated everything online. It is thus more ideal to make the discussion topics of ODF and seminars interrelated, but not exactly the same. Setting word limit for forum discussion can be considered as well.

ODF discussion can also improve classroom discussion by functioning as a reference or starting point. Both focus groups mentioned that they would refer to the discussion forum if they had few thoughts about a given seminar topic. “Forum is like a ‘backup’ for seminar discussion”, as one student put it. In this sense, mentioning and commenting on students’ forum posts in the classroom can serve two pedagogical purposes. First, it is a more efficient way, compared with responding in a forum, for teachers to provide both feedback to and recognition of students’ ODF contributions. Second, this also helps students to have more focused and effective discussion in the classroom based on the ODF. For off-campus international students who are located in a very different time zone, the existence of ODF may not only be a backup, but a “pseudo-seminar” as such. While they may struggle to attend seminars synchronously, the asynchronous feature of ODF help them to be on track and quickly grasp the main themes of each week.

Lastly, the developers of virtual learning and teaching platforms may consider more game-based and social media-based aesthetics to facilitate students’ interactions with each other. One of the respondents who was fond of collecting all the module badges said “it will be so cool if all the badges someone collects appears alongside his/her profile.
image in the virtual learning platform.” This kind of setting is common in social games. Furthermore, enabling students to “like” others’ posts just as they do in social media may also increase students’ interactions with each other in the forum. In my case, while the ODF setting does allow students to grade or rate others’ posts informally, very few students did that because they “felt odd” to grade peers’ posts.

8. Conclusion

With an increasing number of ESL students, especially Chinese students, choosing to study in Western and transnational universities, how to engage them for more active and collaborative learning remains a major question for many educators worldwide. Based on a pedagogical action research of my teaching of social sciences to year 2 BA students in a transnational university in China, this paper discusses the use and value of combining ODF with gamification to enhance ESL students’ participation in the context of the Covid-19 outbreak. Through quantitative analysis, the research identifies the positive correlation between ODF participation and students’ academic performance. The qualitative analysis based on in-depth interviews and focus groups further confirms that ODF, as a popular e-learning tool, helps to bring Chinese students “out of their shells” (Campbell, 2007). When the topics of ODF and classroom discussions are connected (but not exactly the same), students will feel more encouraged to participate in classroom discussion in that they can take time to do research, organize their language expression and verbalize their thoughts in advance. An active discussion enables the co-construction of knowledge and empowers students to take control over their learning process. Applying knowledge basics to real-life experiences through ODF can strengthen their learning interests and confidence.

Moreover, ODF helps to maintain a learning community that is cherished by both my onsite Chinese students and offsite international students. My Chinese students compared the module ODF with the notion of banji (class) in the Chinese educational system, which points to the particular importance of fostering a sense of group belonging for Chinese learners. For offsite international students, an active ODF can make them feel less isolated and more engaged with their learning emotionally and pedagogically. Under the current circumstance of the pandemic where many students are forced to study virtually and alone, ODF serves as an effective tool to help creating and maintaining a learning community that accommodates the social aspect of learning (Wilson & Peterson, 2006).

However, the technology itself will not do the trick. An active ODF presupposes instructors’ involvement, feedback and attempts to create a friendly learning environment. If students’ voluntary ODF participation can be seen as related to the need of self-actualization which ranks the highest in Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs, then their sense of belonging and self-esteem will need to be met in the first place. The themes of “connection” and “recognition” loom large in my interviews with the students, which range from their attitude towards TAs’ feedback, their particular enthusiasm about customized badges and homemade cookies, to the relatively low participation rate of the offsite international students. A friendly learning environment where students feel they are connected with the instructor(s) and each other is a prerequisite for active ODF and is in turn enhanced by it.

Furthermore, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations need be combined to sustain students’ ODF and classroom participation. In this regard, gamification mechanism, such as badges and rewards, constitutes an effective way to provide students with immediate and personalized recognition of their contributions. Gamification can serve as both a trigger and a reminder for self-motivated and capable students to participate in ODF and/or classroom discussions continuously. To improve students’ interaction with each other and interest in an e-learning platform, the function of “like” widely used in social media can be introduced to ODF and badges can be better integrated with a student’s profile in the platform. In these ways, the learning experience itself can be more gamified and fun without resorting to the more expensive practice of designing a specific game for a module.

Given that this research pays more attention to active ODF participants and explores their motivations qualitatively, future pedagogical research can adopt a quantitative approach and involve a bigger number of students of various kinds to evaluate the use and value of combining ODF with gamification to improve student participation, learning interest and self-esteem with learning content. It will also be worthy to quantitatively evaluate the correlation between the ODF participation and the classroom participation of ESL students in international and transnational HE settings.

References


https://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/feb/15/surge-in-students-studying-for-uk-degrees-abroad (last access: August 18, 2021).


### Appendix I: the single lineal regression analyses

#### Model Summary

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#### ANOVA

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