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THE PURPOSE OF ONLINE DISCUSSION

✍ Written by David Backer /

✓ Reviewed by Maha Bali / مها بالي and Rebecca Halpern / 💬 8 Comments /

🖼 "Someday When This Is Over We May Still Have No Answer" by Bethan Phillips; CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Are online discussions really discussions? I've been wondering this since I started teaching online. Many of my students, friends, and colleagues get a sour look on their face when it comes to discussion online, whether it be synchronous or asynchronous. They express, sometimes implicitly and others explicitly, a common sentiment that online discussion is not as good as the real thing, implying that — like the initial question asks — online discussion is not really discussion. *Hybrid Pedagogy* authors and participants have also taken up this question. [Stommel and Harris](#) claim that “wonders” can occur during online discussion, and online teachers can provide “fertile ground for brilliant and lively conversation.” They observe however that most online discussions “go to seed,” and consist of “monotone interjections by its participants.” A recent [#digped chat opened these issues up to the wider *Hybrid Pedagogy* community](#) as well. In many of the ideas articulated in these posts and chats, there is a presumption that online discussions are meaningfully similar to discussions which happen in brick-and-mortar classrooms. Is that presumption accurate? What is online discussion, and is it a lesser version of “the real thing”?

The intuition that online discussion is not real discussion probably comes from the notion that real discussion is something like what [James T. Dillon](#) says it is: a group of people addressing a question in common, speaking and listening to one another. But is this notion appropriate for Blackboard discussion forums, modules, and discussion boards? Or even fast-paced Twitter discussions? Are these even “discussions” at all? What do we mean by the word ‘discussion’ in online discourse?

Let's begin at the beginning. Phenomenologically, when students participate in an asynchronous online discussion forum (without audio or video) they are not talking to a person with a face but rather a screen, in some cases typing words on a keyboard beneath or next to words that someone else has typed. There may be a time-stamp to indicate when the person did this, but other than that there is no hint of non-written particularity, the details of interaction which make discussion

such a rich educational experience: sound of voice (volume, sonority, roughness, inflection), posture, dress, inflection, tempo, feeling, style. They are looking at a screen (phone, tablet, laptop, desktop), reading the words of the online discussion rather than looking at a person and hearing words. This screened experience of educational typing and reading is entirely different from the in real life (IRL) talking and listening of classroom discussions. (Again, if the online discussion happens to be live through a video software, then there are faces and voices, but they are representations of faces and voices through the machine; faces and voices which freeze, garble, and pixelate; in other words, those faces and voices are still *mediated*). The object of attention here is a computer screen, which deserves some careful thought.

One theoretical perspective **I work with** is psychoanalysis, which is a tradition in the early history of psychology focusing on the unconscious, love, and desire in human development and interaction. In psychoanalysis, objects of attention are canvasses for the infusion of meanings from our development, typically “parental” (though that doesn’t have to mean mommy and/or daddy). When we pay something intense attention, we transfer these meanings and “cathect” them, understanding whatever we are focusing on with feelings and thoughts from previous traumas or successes, loves or losses, associations or understandings. In a classroom, the teacher and fellow students are canvases for our cathexes. In my view, a significant difference between discussion and something like recitation or lecture is that, in the latter, one person is cathected during the discourse. The student cathects and introjects a single face and a voice while listening, infusing that face and voice with complex meanings from their past. With this very minimal understanding of cathexis and introjection, let’s think about what’s happening during online discussion. It might help shed some light on the purpose of online discussion, and maybe how we practice it.

First, what the student cathects during online discussion is a computer, not a person. The computer can have many meanings for a user, of course, but those meanings (whatever they are) will be different from those transferred to a teacher or professor. Cathecting a machine must be categorically different than cathecting a person, and the introjections resulting from those cathexes must also be different. I might think of my teacher like I think about my father or mother, or some authority in my life. I will definitely think about my computer quite differently. In the IRL classroom, whatever the course content may be, the *form* of discourse occurs with human bodies in space which speak and listen in certain patterns. Similarly, whatever the content of the online interaction, the *form* always occurs through the computer. **We should not forget Marshall McLuhan’s haunting slogan “the medium is the message.”** This adage is a provocative way of reminding users that form is easily forgotten, or rarely the focus of users’ attention, when it comes to media. Typically *what* is consumed is the focus rather than *how* one consumes that content. Online discussion is no exception. While course content varies widely, students cathect and introject a machine during online discussion. The possibility for further psychoanalytic

insight here is fascinating: what do we transfer onto machines? In some cases, it may be much more educative for students to cathect machines than other people. A machine might not come with the same baggage as a person — though more research is certainly required to answer these questions. In any case, independently of the relative educational benefits of cathecting people versus machines, the *form* of online discussion is machinic, independently of its *content*. Following McLuhan, we should not forget that the *form* of online discussion itself has a message. And that message is whatever occurs in students' experiences when they cathect the machine.

An important note at this point in the argument is in order. McLuhan's aphorism that "the medium is the message" is quite a strong statement. It claims that the meanings and significances which human beings attribute to machines is the message they receive from those machines, independently of whatever content may be communicated through the machines. According to this strong formulation, the fact that television is the machine a show comes through is what matters for users' experience, whether or not the show is a PBS documentary or Real Housewives. This interpretation is too strong for my purposes here. I think it is unreasonable to claim that in online discussion, the only thing that students learn are the significances they attribute to the machine they use to participate in the discussion. Rather, I would modify McLuhian aphorism to "the medium is *a* message." In other words, instead of claiming polemically that the form through which the content comes is the only harbinger of meaning in online discussion, I am claiming that the machine is one harbinger of meaning, in addition to the content. McLuhan's provocation is helpful in that it gets us to pay attention to the fact that there is a machine there, a form of media, in addition to the content. Rather than reduce the content to form my understanding of McLuhan here is a bit weaker: we should not forget the form in the midst of our attending to the content. In online discussion, we should not forget that what students cathect is a machine and that they stare at this machine in the same way they might stare at a lecturer.

The students' transferences, cathexes, and introjections are unique in IRL discussion and online discussion, and therefore we should therefore not expect that the interactions they have with the machine should be anything like the interactions they have with human beings (though they may interact with human beings through the machines). The difference between the two kinds of discussion — online and IRL — is so distinct that the former should not be compared to or evaluated with notions of the latter. The difference complicates the notion that online discussions are worse versions of IRL discussions. The argument I offer here is that saying an online discussion is a worse version of an IRL discussion is like saying an apple is a worse version of an orange. Disappointment with online discussions because they are not like IRL discussion is like being disappointed with an apple because it is a bad orange.

So, a student cathects a computer, introjecting its screen and frames and keyboard. The smell and look and touch of the computer. The way it functions. The words, the font of the words, the

blinking cursor. Then within this scheme is the content of the course, readings or videos and other materials. Through this medium comes the content of the course, but the medium also sends a message. Though there might be many other students interacting in the online environment, typing and reading, there is still only one computer, one screen, one set of windows and frames within the screen. The object of attention during online discussion, what the student looks at and cathects, is a computer. Is 'discussion' the right word for this? Yes and no.

On the one hand it is not, because, in the above analysis, at least in terms of the student's experience and the form of the course (rather than the content) online discussion has more in common with lecturing than IRL discussion, at least in terms of where students' focused attention settles. By "where students' focused attention settles" I mean something simpler than the content of a lesson or course module: simply where and how and what students are looking at as they learn. In a lecture, students sit and stare at a single object: the lecturer. In an IRL discussion, students look, speak, and listen with multiple objects. In online discussion, like during a lecture, students sit and stare at a single object as well: but it is a computer rather than a person speaking. The lecturer is the computer. This lecturer is a screen with a keyboard and includes a complex series of frames within which the student types sentences in varying sequences. By this I am not only talking about video lectures which students watch, but rather more perceptually. In a lecture, the lecturer is the sole object of attention. There is only one object of attention: bracketing the complex material engaged with *in the screen*, it remains true that students exclusively engage *with the screen* when learning online. Students in online courses stare at a computer when learning online the same way they would stare at a lecturer speaking, focusing their attention on a single object. At a lecture, it's a person. Online, it's the computer. The computer is the single object cathected, as the medium through which any content comes: the form of online discussion, in other words, is non-discussive because it involves staring at a single computer. Online discussion is, in this sense, a computer's lecture. (Not a computer lecture, which would mean watching a person lecture on the screen. Rather, by "computer's lecture" I mean that when participating in online discussion we sit and stare at the computer like we might sit and stare at single person lecturing to us in an IRL classroom.) While it is true that in a one-on-one IRL interaction, a person would focus their attention on a single object as well. In that case, it would be possible to have a discussion — if what the two people do is discuss — while attending to one and only one object. This is a significant theoretical issue in the philosophy of discussion, and there is not space in this essay to take it up. But I flag it here as a prompt for further thinking: Is an online discussion like a one-on-one conversation with another person, or is more like a computer's lecture? This question may go some length in focusing the aforementioned question about what kind of meanings do we attribute to machines when we cathect them.

In any case, online discussions are still discussions. It would be a mistake to say all we do during online discussion is stare intensely at a computer. Most of the discussions in my online courses

occur asynchronously on discussion boards. On these written discussion boards, for example, we read and write responsively. The whole situation of online discussion is therefore more akin, in this respect, to written correspondence. When writing a letter, one sits by oneself communicating by writing asynchronously, interacting with a medium of communication (like paper and pen) rather than an immedium (like bodies speaking words). This kind of epistolary discussion is no less a discussion than the face-to-face talking and listening form of discussion. It's just a different sense of the word 'discussion'. There is a sense of the word, which is actually quite old, [dating back to at least the 17th century in English](#), reserved for written adjudication of varying perspectives. Academics and intellectuals still use this meaning when embarking on a treatise — an essay of something — or even a lecture. They may write or say “in the following I will discuss...” and proceed to a written consideration of arguments on a topic or question. They obviously don't mean to say that they're going to facilitate an examination of several people who will speak and listen about a question in common. Rather they mean that they will pose a question, survey varying responses, and add a response themselves. This is a discussion of reading and writing rather than speaking and listening. Following [David Bridges's](#) definition of educational discussion, this assaying is an “improvement of knowledge or judgement through consideration of multiple points of view.” Yet the form of this consideration is not spoken. It is epistolary, and in the case of online discussion, that letter writing is speeded up exponentially. Synchronous discussions that happen in text would be the same, except even faster than the asynchronous situation. Regarding synchronous online discussions with video or audio, the interaction is more like talking on the phone than being in an IRL discussion: one is alone interacting with others through a machine. Rather than letter-writing, this online discussion is more like an educational phone call.

Is online discussion a computer's lecture, a sped-up written correspondence, or an educational phone call? All of them. We stare at the single object of attention, use that object to write a fast series of letters, or interact with others aurally and visually through a machine. In any case, I think the intuition which casts online discussion as a lesser form of discussion, or not really discussion, is misplaced. This intuition relies on the idea that authentic discussion is talking and listening. Online discussion is certainly an inauthentic form of talking and listening: it is reading, typing, or talking through a computer. But what happens during online discussion is also just a different kind of discussion, more like letter writing or a phone call. The IRL form of classroom discourse most similar to online discussion is lecture, since one stares at a single object during the lecture: the face of the lecturer. During an online discussion one is always staring at a single object during the discussion: the screen of the computer. In an IRL discussion however, among more than two people, one looks at many objects during the discussion: the faces of the participants. The online discussion is more like the lecture than the discussion, in this sense. During this focused attention — whether on a human lecturer or a computer — the human psyche understands what it focuses upon with the myriad frustrations, traumas, desires, and attachments it has formed in its unique life. In psychoanalysis we call this process “projection”. When you project onto someone or

something, you understand that person or thing through all the trivial and momentous experiences that have formed who you are. Parenting during youth (in whatever arrangement: mother/father, community, large family, orphan...) builds the foundation for these projections. What we call “daddy issues” is a simple way of saying that someone experiences another person through memories, attachments, and experiences of their father. When students listen to a lecture, staring at that single person, they cathect the person and thereby project meanings onto them, understanding what the lecturer is saying through those projects. Going back to the weaker interpretation of McLuhan’s aphorism, the lecturer (medium) is also a message (lecture). If the lecturer reminds me of my mother, father, a teacher I had, someone who yelled at me once in the street, or any other number of experiences that make me who I am, then I project onto these meanings onto the lecturer and it influences how I experience their lecture. When students participate in an online discussion, they cathect machines during the discussion and they project meanings onto the machine. The machine (medium) is also a message (online discussion). The claim here is that we should not forget how different a machine is from a human lecturer, and that online discussions, by extension, are just not the same kind of interaction as IRL discussion. [Sherry Turkle’s recent work on conversation is an interesting text to consult in this context.](#)

To conclude then, it is not as though online discussion is not discussion. It is rather letter writing sped up or an educational phone call (and being lectured to by a computer). The purpose of online discussion is therefore not to have a talking-listening discussion. Online discussion happening on discussion boards is more like writing letters than the in-the-flesh face-to-face interactions of the IRL classroom. While we shouldn’t forget that the medium is the message, that the *form* of online discussion is just as important as the *content*, and online discussion is like a computer’s lecture, these should not be seen as a loss of authenticity. Rather, online discussion is the entrance of other older forms of discussion into mainstream teaching and learning in a new way. To teach better online discussions, we might therefore focus on the following:

- Participating well in online discussions might be more like writing a good letter or having a good phone conversation, as opposed to a good spoken kind comment in an IRL discussion. We should not expect online discussions to be anything at all like IRL discussions. They are categorically different. In other words, being disappointed with online discussions because they are not like IRL discussions is like being disappointed with apples because they are not oranges.
- In planning online courses, generating online assignments, and creating materials for online teaching, it is important to remember that online discussions require students to focus intense attention on a machine, and therefore compels them to cathect and introject that machine. Independently of the fluidity of your module and software, students transfer meanings onto their machines during the learning process rather than a person. While the introjection of machines is an interesting opportunity for further educational research, as an

instructor, plan for student participation with this in mind: they are interacting with a machine and not people. An online discussion is more like a computer's lecture than an IRL discussion, no matter how interactive.

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8 RESPONSES

Torn Halves

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🕒 [March 22, 2016 at 2:15 pm](#)

The idea that a phenomenology is needed here was a good one, but the immediate sidestep to psychoanalysis and the very questionable idea that what everyone cathects in online discussions is the computer led to the fertile idea withering immediately.

Why not do a bit of phenomenology? What are the most significant ways in which the experience of online discussions differ from those offline? How is the lived experience of the apple different from that of the orange exactly? The idea that one cathects a person and the other cathects a machine ignores the obvious fact that when people are fully involved in any discussion what is cathected is the matter in hand. And here we have a case in point. I am irritated, not by the computer, and not by the author, who may or may not have said something triggering bad memories of my overbearing father. No, I am irritated by the superficiality of the argument here; and the fact that the way of describing the difference between the fruit is just plain wrong. People who debate with passion cathect ideas, perhaps the idea of the truth above all.

That is a similarity between the two fruit. How about the differences? Surely one massive difference is the experience of attention. Offline and face to face, if the discussion has not degenerated into a shouting match a norm might be observed with only one person speaking at a time. A community of sorts is present, and the speaker feels the attention of that community, which can so easily be lost. Online there is no experience of being attended to, or only a very attenuated one. That changes the

character of the debate, does it not? The ideas become completely detached from any felt sense of a group integrity (especially when the participants share no common life offline). They are the only things that matter. Although, in the social media the permanence of the interjections and the way the media can be used for social climbing and monetising a reputation can mean that the ideas count for a lot less than a very personalised form of reputation (another thing cathected far more online than the tech).

We could go on. But we will leave it there as an asynchronous contribution to a discussion that had a good idea but then lost it.

David Backer

 [Reply](#)

 [March 24, 2016 at 11:30 am](#)

I appreciate this comment, thank you. I'm always up for an online discussion! Tell me if I'm reading your critique correctly. You claim that I deliver an unfulfilled promise. You say that I say I'm going to do a phenomenology of online discussion, but instead I do a psychoanalytic treatment of the *form* of online discussion rather than its content. You call this "weak" and a "lost" idea. Is that right? In your second full paragraph, you say that I do not focus on content and therefore it is a disappointing phenomenology. The third paragraph appears to use the psychoanalytic treatment in the essay to make a claim about community which I don't take as a critique necessarily, but then casts it as a critique of the essay. I have some responses, but I want to make sure that I understand your questions before I do.

,

 [Reply](#)

 [March 25, 2016 at 4:16 pm](#)

Let's discuss this fragment: "You say that I say I'm going to do a phenomenology of online discussion, but instead I do a psychoanalytic treatment..." You mention (albeit as an adverb) the idea of phenomenology (a body of theory that perhaps not every online practitioner is familiar with):

"Phenomenologically, when students participate in an asynchronous online discussion forum (without audio or video) they are not talking to a person with a face but rather a screen,"

The implication is that to understand the difference between online and offline discussions, we need to do some phenomenology. Agree 100%. Great idea. Okay, let's do some phenomenology. Let's really stick our necks out here and risk getting them burnt. Immediately, though, two problems arise.

Firstly, the phenomenology suggested is the phenomenology of a failed discussion. You might remember Heidegger's excellent discussion of tools in *Being and Time*. When tools are working well, they disappear. The user is unaware of them, and all the concentration is on the matter in hand (e.g. how straight the nails are going into the wood or how well you are getting your ideas across to the other discussants). To be giving priority to the bearded man offline, or to the blinking cursor online indicates that things are broken. It's a failed discussion. Problematic. No?

Then the second problem appears with the switch from phenomenology to psychotherapy. Now there are doubtless some for whom a connection can be made there, but you seem to pitch this to a non-specialist audience. For those of us concerned with the truth of what is being said, a big question is being begged there. Phenomenology gives all the weight to conscious experience whereas psychoanalysis insists on seeing the conscious as symptomatic of unconscious forces capable of explaining diseased states. There is a leap there. How do you justify making it? I would be interested to hear.

I suggested how a phenomenology might begin. There are lots of interesting points to be made, and have nothing to do with how triggering the other person's beard is or his avatar or the pixelation of the screen. They have to do with the different quality of the social relations – I suggested the palpable absence of community.

Gadamer (if I remember correctly) wrote a fair amount about discussions aiming at a fusion of horizons. At the time, discussions were primarily face to face, or, at least, he took them to be paradigmatically such. Discussion is typically how a certain type of community resolves issues and finds a way forward. To find that way, some common understanding has to emerge. Hypothesis: such discussions are the exception, not the rule online. The readers of the Guardian do not form a community that feels it must achieve a common understanding. It is the sort of discussion that Wittgenstein would have described as one in which ideas have gone on holiday. That relationship to the absent community is palpable.

That is just a suggestion of the sort of direction the phenomenology could go in if the highly dubious metamorphosis into psychoanalysis were avoided and if we wanted to go beyond the idea that people discussing things online and so quickly resorting to

abuse or doing the digital equivalent of throwing them out are cathecting the tech. They might be cathecting the tech while standing in the queue in the Apple store, but they ain't when they are either slagging each other off online or treading very, very carefully so as, e.g., not to offend any potential members of their PLN.

David Backer

 [Reply](#)

 [April 13, 2016 at 10:48 am](#)

This is a very helpful clarification! Thanks. I think you're pointing to a very rich area for research: the phenomenology of online discussion. The citations of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein are extremely fruitful and I agree that there's a very deep and interesting analysis to be made with those traditions. I'd look forward to reading that paper!

By using the adverb "phenomenologically" with a more mainstream audience, as you rightly put it, I was trying to signal something very general—an interest in the ways online discussion is given in experience (as opposed to an empirical approach, for instance). My study of phenomenology is mostly the result of an engagement with Hegel and Husserl. Freud is of course quite a different tradition than Hegel and Husserl, and this is the point I would like to make in response to your helpful clarifications.

In philosophy psychoanalysis is treated differently than your characterization of it as a "psychotherapy" only interested how one might be "triggered by a beard." I agree with your assessment that psychoanalysis and phenomenology are concerned with different aspects of "what it's like" to be in an online discussion, and that that difference falls along the conscious/unconscious divide. But I think there is a tendency to debase theories which engage with the unconscious, and I'm sensing that tendency in your writing. It is reductive and problematic to deem psychoanalysis "highly dubious" in the way you have, at least without an argument. I think psychoanalysis is in a very strong position to deal with online discussion because it is inclusive of the unconscious in addition to conscious experience, instead of repressing that aspect of experience as is so frequently done in intellectual life. The life of the emotions, love, desire, attachment, feeling, and loss are often disavowed in the creation of knowledge on any given topic—especially technology, which, if we follow McLuhan, is rationality ablated and manifest. This is what makes psychoanalysis particularly interesting to me in the context of online discussion: what is our conscious and unconscious relationship

to technology? What are the desires, feelings, attachments, and irrational ways in which screens and such are given to our experience—particularly since these screens are an ablated rationality?

In any case, I think your characterization of psychoanalysis is a straw man here, and what you evaluate as “highly dubious” is really just a different—and I would say more inclusive and rigorous—kind of theoretical paradigm for thinking about what it’s like to be in an online discussion. I agree that a phenomenology using the authors you have mentioned would be fascinating. I also agree that I did not hash this difference between between phenomenology and psychoanalysis out in the article, and perhaps a sentence or two making this point clear would have been good. You’ve helped clarify all of this however, and I’ve learned something from reading and writing your words on my computer. I feel grateful for the written correspondence, and the opportunity to engage in the very thing my article was about right beneath the article itself!

Sarah

 [Reply](#)

 [April 4, 2016 at 11:51 am](#)

I believe you are correct to call attention to the fact that the medium of an online course is a big part of the way people interact with and learn from the course. But the idea of people cathecting the computer is so abstract, I can’t really imagine what this would look like in real life.

I was also a little confused by the fact that you seemed to be for the most part comparing a face-to-face lecture-based class to an online interactive class. But this leaves out the more interactive face-to-face format, and the online lecture format. Is there a reason you chose those two class formats to compare over the other possible formats for face-to-face and online classes?

I do like the idea of thinking of online discussion as a series of letters though and will try thinking in those terms next time I participate in an online discussion.

Thanks for the article.

David Backer

 [Reply](#)

 [April 21, 2016 at 2:04 pm](#)

Thanks for your comment, Sarah! While the term “cathect” is a bit abstract, what it refers to is supposed to be very concrete. (This is a problem with psychoanalysis, and philosophy in general I think). We cathect what we project onto—if I expect my teacher to fulfill an expectation in my life, and that expectation is related to the way I expect/feel about my father, then I’m cathecting the teacher because how I feel about the teacher and think of the teacher is influenced by my previously developed relationship to my father. In this piece, I’m interested in the way we cathect machines, as opposed to people. It’s supposed to be one way of drawing a very clear distinction between the kinds of things we interact with during online discussion. The other question you ask is about the interactive online class vs. the face-to-face lecture. I’m using that comparison because I want to provoke the thought that when we do online discussions we are looking at the same thing the whole time: the computer. This is just like a lecture in a brick and mortar situation: there is a single object of attention. That’s why an online discussion is a computer’s lecture—because we’re staring at the computer. I’m doing it right now, actually. I’m writing you this comment and staring at the computer like I would stare at a lecturer. Does that help?

Tylir

 [Reply](#)

 [April 14, 2016 at 11:12 am](#)

I have been teaching online for over 4 years now, as well as finishing my Bachelors online – actually for the program in which I teach now. I am curious about your conversation here and find it interesting, but like many that I have read its problematic to me on its assumptions. My students by participate in asynchronous discussions in a way that is very different than if we were having conversations face-to-face. Last quarter I was excited because I was teaching two of the same sections of a psychology course in different formats – one fully online and one hybrid. The conversations that occurred during our hybrid weeks was surely different, but not any less engaged or conversational than the face-to-face weeks. Here is where I do agree that they are two completely different mediums and they really cannot be compared. Students engaged differently, but no less.

I think we also have to be careful with our terms and variables. I cannot get past my irritation of the term in real life [IRL]. If a student is sitting on their end of the computer and working on a class assignment – are they not doing something in real life? How is what they produce online not real? What is assumed about the online environment and the brick and mortar if we use the term IRL.

I think we need to continue make these sorts of observations as you have here and I appreciate the read. While we dont have the visual or auditory (in some cases) cues that we hold so dearly in the classroom, in the online class, I think there are new and other things, like how people format their answers, how often they check in (even when not required), how they engaged with their classmates (even when not required), so on and so forth. I think we need to continue to think through this process of teaching online as a different research project with a different set of variables.

Thanks for the read. Got me thinking this morning.

Mary McNabb

 [Reply](#)

 *May 6, 2016 at 1:28 pm*

I agree with Tylir. I was making notes on your article because it concerns a large portion of my doctoral dissertation and the term discussion is a point that is bothering my advisor. Early on I changed the acronym IRL to f2f for the same reasons Tyler cited. My studying is real life and I work entirely online. His question about the assumption about online environments and the term IRL is particularly apt.

I enjoyed the article. It raised several aspects of online discussion I hadn't been able to verbalize: particularly the similarity of online discussion to letter writing, the idea of focus and the concept that online discussion introduces a traditional form of discussion into online teaching and learning in a new way.

Thanks for a thought provoking article.

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