

Online learning punishes minority students, but video chats can help

September 27 2017, by Allan Mackinnon And Emma Macfarlane



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Online learning is expanding in Canada [at a rate of about 8.75 per cent every year](#). This shift to online environments has redefined the format of education. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), for example, have become wildly popular, with [more than 700 universities offering 6,850 courses to 58 million students in 2016](#).

Universities promote online education as a [flexible option for students](#), but with this flexibility comes complexity.

In our respective roles —as an education professor who writes online courses, and as a graduate [student](#) and online course instructor (also known as a "tutor marker") —we can run entire courses without meeting our students face-to-face. We do not know what they look like, what their voices sound like or how they interact in the classroom.

We have witnessed the struggle that English [language](#) minority students often face to fulfil requirements. And the negative impact of the online format on their engagement and success. We also believe online courses can work to support these students —when instructors provide safe spaces for ungraded dialogue.

Language, identity and self-expression

English language minority students, also known as [English language learners](#), face unique challenges in online courses. The online course features pre-written content that students read and respond to. But not everybody understands or expresses knowledge in the same way.

Language minority students are disadvantaged by having to adhere to dominant Western structures of writing in online discussion forums, their only opportunity to interact with peers in the course. Online discussion forums are often graded to the same academic standards as formal essays. Minority students may struggle to communicate using only the academic English that is required. They are devalued by their differences in discourse.

A comparison of five free [#MOOC](#) platforms for [#HigherEd](#)
<https://t.co/SFqbZbO9ED> pic.twitter.com/COvVVbDZKh

— EdTech Higher Ed (@EdTech_HigherEd) [September 15, 2017](#)

Often, English language minority students are also being socialized into North American higher education, and the general Western setting. From a socio-cultural perspective, language use is tied closely to [race, ethnicity, social class and identity](#). This indicates a relationship between their ability to express themselves authentically in an online course, and the language they are expected to use.

Minority students' methods of engagement with course content and their peers may differ intuitively from those of students who are already familiar with the style and content of writing required in this setting.

Video chats and 'safe houses'

The current means of defining, engaging with and evaluating students' discourse in [online courses](#) must change to enable language minority students to freely share their perspectives.

Offering opportunities for non-written interaction provides these students with alternative outlets for communication. [Online video chats between students and instructors](#) can help promote dialogue and interaction with course material. It enables students who feel inhibited to grow more familiar with academic discourse.

A "[safe house](#)" is a platform in which students can merge colloquial and academic discourse as they develop their writing style. In an online course, this safe house could take the form of an unevaluated discussion forum in which students are free to engage with the course material, with the instructor, and with each other. These spaces can be used for ungraded, informal communication, enabling more inclusive discussion for all students.

Grading, discussion and consultation

Even instructors who are unable to change the structure of their online course can help support language minority students by altering their grading techniques. Despite the weighting of some rubrics, it is important to remember that students' formatting and grammar is secondary to their ideas. Educators can support students by [redirecting their efforts away](#) from spelling, grammar, citation or the structure of their responses, and focusing their efforts on crafting a unique argument.

[Providing comments](#) and asking prompting questions throughout students' work engages discussion. This helps shift our written interactions to emphasize the sharing of ideas rather than the correction of students' writing. It makes the online course more accessible for language minority students.

Overall it's clear that we need to establish [more inclusive curricula and assessment](#) to best support language minority students in online course environments.

Whenever course authors have the opportunity to revise, even in minor ways, their courses for content, we would recommend they consult with students who have taken the course to determine more inclusive examples and attend to all voices in the course design. Such a measure will ensure that all learners identify with and engage in the course content.

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