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## Fostering partner orientation in initial, synchronous virtual exchanges

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Ciara R. Wigham (Université Clermont Auvergne, France)

Cathryn Bennett (Université Clermont Auvergne, France)

Kristi Jauregi-Ondarra (Utrecht University, The Netherlands)

### ABSTRACT

While much is known about student engagement in traditional classroom settings, there is much we do not know about students' engagement in online learning tasks. Following from what we do know about dimensions of student engagements (behavioral, cognitive and attitudinal), our study looks to extending our understanding about learner engagement in online tasks. To achieve this, we utilise Gijssen's (2021) task engagement parameters in the virtual world with the incorporation of Multimodal (inter)action analysis (Norris, 2004). By analysing students' modality in synchronous online tasks in a virtual exchange, we seek to highlight recommendations for future VE teachers to foster student engagement and thus learning. Our multimodal analysis, specifically students' use of multiple modes, evidences our findings that student-teachers were engaged in our intercultural virtual exchange tasks. This study recommends the creation of task prompts which require students to find commonalities and challenges to empathise with one another to develop a relationship with new VE partners.

### ABSTRACT SECOND LANGUAGE

Terwijl er veel bekend is over leerlingbetrokkenheid in traditionele klassikale settings, is er veel dat we niet weten over leerlingbetrokkenheid in online leertaken. Op basis van wat we wel weten over dimensies van leerlingbetrokkenheid (gedrag, cognitief en attitudineel), probeert onze studie ons begrip van leerlingbetrokkenheid bij online taken uit te breiden. Om dit te bereiken gebruiken we Gijssen's (2021) parameters voor taakbetrokkenheid in de virtuele wereld met de integratie van Multimodiale (inter)actie analyse (Norris, 2004). Door de modaliteit van studenten in synchrone online taken in een virtuele uitwisseling te analyseren, proberen we aanbevelingen te doen voor toekomstige VE-docenten om studentbetrokkenheid en dus leren te bevorderen. Onze multimodale analyse, met name het gebruik van meerdere modi door studenten, bewijst onze bevindingen dat student-docenten betrokken waren bij onze interculturele virtuele uitwisselingstaken. Dit onderzoek beveelt aan om taakaanwijzingen te creëren die studenten verplichten om overeenkomsten en uitdagingen te vinden om zich in elkaar in te leven om een relatie met nieuwe VE-partners te ontwikkelen.

#### 1. Student engagement

Researchers have long been interested in understanding student engagement in hopes to elucidate why some students are, and others not, motivated to learn in class. Early research in student motivation looked into the factors that contributed to student drop out or leaving school early (Finn, 1989), while more recent research has focused on the characteristics of engaged learners so that teachers may be able to foster more engaging classroom environments.

##### *1.1 Characteristics of engaged learners*

Helme and Clarke (2001) and Fredricks et al. (2019) report that engaged learners typically exhibit the following signs:

- Put effort into the task
- Continue in the task despite challenges that arise
- Know how to self-regulate their learning to maintain their interest over time



Along this vein, Lambert and Zhang (2019) suggest there are clear ‘indicators’ of student engagement such as providing feedback to their partner, being able to justify arguments and negotiate how to complete the task. Further, they argue that it is possible to increase students’ engagement by involving them in the task design such as having them design questions for their partner.

### 1.2 Dimensions of student engagement

Although there is some debate on how many dimensions of student engagement exist, most researchers have agreed on three main dimensions of learner engagement which are behavioural, cognitive and attitudinal. These three dimensions explain: the actions students take in the task (behavioural), what they think during the task (cognitive) and how they feel in the task (attitudinal). Indeed there is a wealth of research linking attitudinal effort and engagement in tasks (Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). For example, feeling enthusiastic or bored can result in students being more, or less, engaged in the task.

With the rise of online learning following the Covid19 pandemic, researchers have become interested in understanding how students engage in activities in online learning environments. Specifically, Gijzen (2021) has investigated student engagement in virtual environments, providing a list of seven parameters depicting students’ task engagement. She argues that previous research has yet to measure the social dimension of engagement. For our study, we applied Gijzen’s task parameters relating to partner orientation to our dataset as outlined in table 1.

**Table 1:** Dimensions of partner orientation (Gijzen, 2021, p. 68)

<b>Behavioural Engagement:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Paying attention to what the partner is saying</li><li>· Providing and accepting support and feedback</li><li>· Giving compliments</li><li>· Using comprehension checks and production prompts (e.g. ‘Am I going too fast?’ or ‘What do you think?’)</li><li>· Rephrasing and simplifying</li><li>· Expressing comprehension confirmation (e.g. ‘I understand’) or doing a head nod.</li></ul>
<b>Attitudinal Engagement:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Commenting positively on working together with their partner</li><li>· Saying that they feel comfortable with their partner</li><li>· Asking if the partner feels comfortable as well</li></ul>
<b>Cognitive Engagement:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Commenting on the importance of developing a relationship with a partner</li></ul>

We investigated this task parameter via synchronous meetings with pre-service teachers in a virtual exchange between Dutch and French students.

### 1.3 Virtual exchange

Virtual exchanges (VE), also referred to as Telecollaboration, are “sustained online collaborative learning and interaction with partners from different cultural backgrounds as part of their study programmes” (O’Dowd, 2023, p. X). VE includes asynchronous (individual) and synchronous (partner/group) tasks. There are several benefits for students to participate in VE such as learning about another culture, practising a second language and utilising new digital tools and platforms



within language education (Emir & Yangin-Ekşi, 2024; O’Dowd, 2021). Dooly & Vinagre (2022) further suggest that pre-service teachers benefit from VE as they learn language via meaningful tasks. The format of tasks (asynchronous/synchronous) and type of task (information exchange, compare/analyses and collaboration) present many opportunities for measuring student engagement online.

Learner engagement has been measured in several methods including students’ reporting on time they are on the task versus the time they are not focused on the task (Finn & Zimmer, 2012), classroom observation and stimulated recall (Anderson, 1975), questionnaires (Finn and Zimmer, 2012) and interviews. In our study, we collected data from students’ online synchronous meetings on BigBlueButton and their asynchronous post-task reflections. By collecting their online meeting, we could investigate their engagement from a multimodal perspective.

#### 1.4 Partner orientation and modality

Gijsen (2021) refers to ‘partner orientation’ as “the effort [students] invest in establishing and deepening a relationship with their communication partners for the purpose of strengthening the interaction” (p.68). While her research looked at partner orientation in the virtual world, we felt there was much to learn in investigating this in students’ regular online communications. Specifically we were interested to uncover how students strengthened a new relationship with their partner they have just met. Our decision to analyse students’ online engagement from a multimodal perspective came from our belief that students who are genuinely engaged in a task display non-verbal signals as well as verbal comments indicating their behavioral, cognitive or attitudinal engagement. Looking at students’ facial expressions and gestures are a relatively new means of assessing engagement within the literature. Norris (2004, 2020) describes that multimodal (inter)action analysis can help researchers to identify main and subsequent actions which assist in communication, such as higher- and lower-level actions. She explains that lower-level actions such as students’ gaze or facial movements can be combined with higher-level actions such as the sentence being said. These combine to form ‘modal configurations’ which can be high-modal intensity or low-modal intensity which she suggests indicates more or less engagement by the student.

With this information, we wanted to verify if students’ who displayed many non-verbal actions (low-level actions) aligned with their comments (high-level actions) of being engaged in the task.

## 2. How the study was conducted

To investigate this idea, we analysed students’ first synchronous meeting in the virtual exchange as we believed this would demonstrate how students fostered partner orientation with peers they had not met before. Second, we compared our multimodal analysis to our grounded theory analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of their spoken data, namely what they *said* in the synchronous and wrote in the asynchronous post-reflective tasks.

33 pre-service teachers (17 French, 16 Dutch) participated in a virtual exchange in Autumn 2022. The study was part of the E-LIVE (Engaging Learners in Intercultural Virtual Exchange) project which was funded by the Erasmus+ Cooperation partnerships in school education (KA220-SCH) 2021-2024. The E-LIVE project includes 32 associate partner schools in several countries: the Netherlands, Spain, France and the United Kingdom.



## 2.1 Participants

The present case study focuses on three pairs, a total of six students. Pairs were selected based on their level of engagement in class prior to the VE beginning, with pair one demonstrating high levels of class participation to pair three which had lower levels of class participants. Students' names have been changed to protect their identification. Table 2 presents participants' background including their pseudonym, age and maternal language.

Table 2: Participants' in the IVE

Pair No.	Participant	Age	Maternal language
1	Jennifer	21	French
	Ettie	22	Dutch
2	Manon	<sup>1</sup> -	French
	Cora	-	Dutch
3	Cécile	-	French & Arabic
	Maria	26	Dutch

## 2.2 Data collection and analysis

Collected data took the form of participants' first synchronous meeting which was transcribed and their post-task reflections which were submitted to their teacher. ELAN software was used to conduct multimodal analysis (Sloetjes & Wittenburg, 2008).

There were several stages required to prepare the recorded data for analysis. These steps are outlined below:

1. Transcription of video recordings in Microsoft word
2. Video files were converted into .wav and mp4 and imported into ELAN
3. Transcripts were coded according to Gijsen's parameters
4. Grounded Theory was applied to the transcripts to identify new High-level actions of students
5. Short excerpts were selected that depicted Gijsen's partner orientation for Multimodal (Inter)action Analysis (MIA)
6. MIA was applied to excerpts to verify learner engagement alignment

Participants' transcripts and post-task reflections were analysed using Gijsen's task parameters (2021).

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<sup>1</sup> Participants were not asked to state their age in their language biographies, therefore ages provided in the table are only known for those who volunteered this information.



## 2.3 Designed tasks in our VE

O'Dowd and Ware (2009) have outlined several task types that are common within VEs. Following this advice, table 3 presented the task that participants' completed in our VE.

Table 3: Pre/post tasks of the IVE

Task No.	Pre-task instructions	Main task instructions	Post-task instructions
1	Create a short video introducing yourself and upload it onto Moodle.	Comment on your partner's video.	Write a reflection on the prompts provided.
2	Create a moodle post about your education system and English teacher qualification for your partner.	Schedule a meeting with your partner on BigBlueButton (BBB) and talk about the prompts provided.	Write a reflection on the prompts provided.
3	Design a future VE activity that you could teach. Upload onto Moodle.	Look at your partner's VE task and give them feedback during the BBB meeting.	Write a reflection on the prompts provided.

Prior to the main task, there was a pre-task which assisted students in completing the main task. For example, prior to students' first online meeting (and the subject of our study, task 2) students were asked to write a post about their country's education system and the qualifications of becoming an English teacher. This information acted as the basis for a comparison of their cultures and how they could learn from one another's differences. Following each main task, students answer reflective questions about the task, the communication with their partner, their collaboration, intercultural experience and the digital tool used.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 New HLAs of student engagement

Regarding Gijsen's (2021) task parameters related to behavioural engagement (as shown in table 1), 'Expressing comprehension confirmation' was the most frequent with pair 2 expressing the most references at 75 with pair 3 having 37 and pair 1 using 35. Concerning attitudinal engagement, we did not find any markers as outlined by Gijsen, however we can report 'Asking questions' a task parameter in cognitive engagement as being high with pair one asking 39 questions, followed by pair two asking 20 and pair three asking 16.

Following our analysis of Gijsen's task parameters, we identified three new high-level actions based on our grounded theory analysis of the transcripts. These include 'talking about a common fact/interest', 'expressing empathy' and 'making an un/favourable comparison' as shown in table 4.

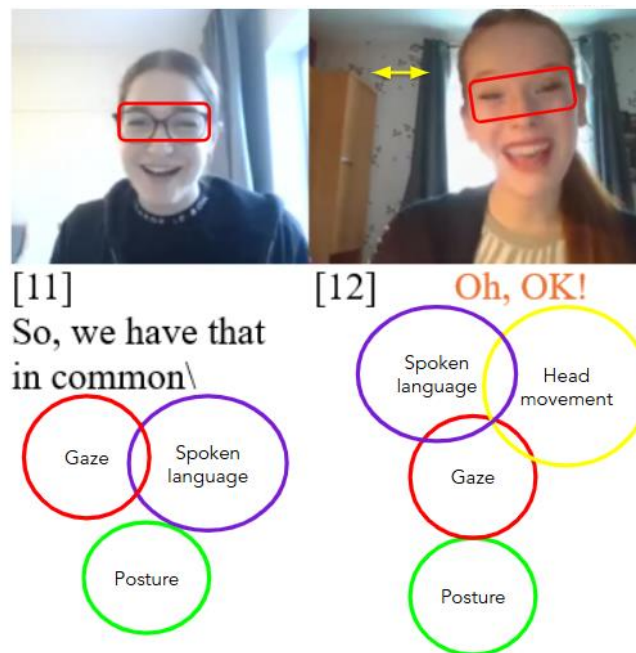


Table 4: Extension of Gijsen’s task engagement HLAs

Engagement dimension	New High-Level Actions	Pair 1	Pair 2	Pair 3
Behavioural engagement	Talking about a common fact/interest	2	3	0
Attitudinal engagement	Expressing empathy	2	5	2
Cognitive engagement	Making an un/favourable comparison	1	6	1

Concerning participants’ behavioural engagement, we noted that participants who discussed a common fact or interest displayed high-modal density including shared laughter and smiling. Figure 1 shows an example of the facial expressions (low-level actions) that participants used when realising that both of their mothers are teachers and were also part of the reason they were training to become an English teacher.

Figure 1: Modal configuration of pair 1: Teaching inspiration



In figure 1 we can see that both students employed several modes including gaze, spoken language and their posture is directed towards one another. Specifically in frame 12, we see that Jennifer has also tilted her head to the side slightly adding an additional mode: head movement.

We can also see this new high-level action in an excerpt of pair two’s conversation where they realise that both have spent some time in the United Kingdom and talk about the accents they heard while





living there. In this excerpt Cora and Manon share a mutual difficulty for understanding the Scouse accent (Figure 2).

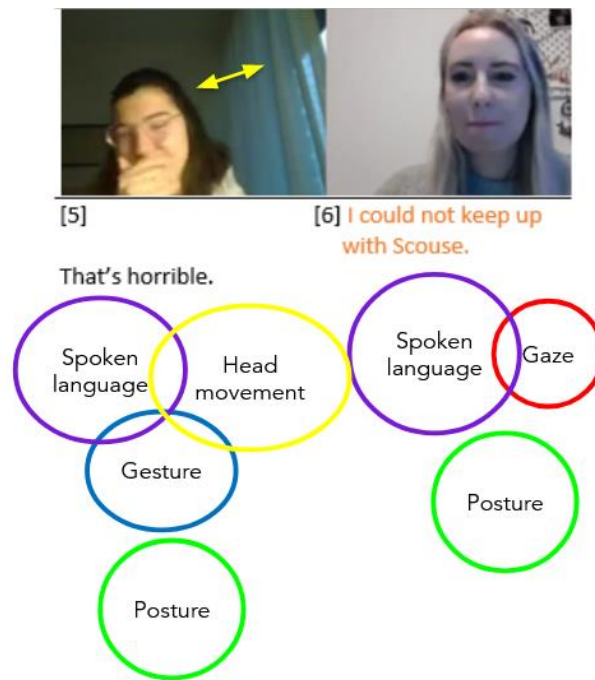


Figure 2: Modal configuration of pair 2: Accents

In figure 2, our MIA analysis shows that students used several modes including spoken language, head movement, gestures, aligned posture and gaze.

Regarding participants' attitudinal engagement, we identified 'expressing empathy' as a new high-level action. This label has been applied to comments of being able to relate or empathise with something their partner has said. We found 5 instances of this with pair two, followed by 2 references in pairs one and three.

In pair one's dialogue below, we see that Ettie empathises with the amount of work that Jennifer describes is necessary when training to become an English teacher in France.

**Jennifer: ... in the masters degree, we have a lot of lessons uh and we have the internship [laugh] and many projects, so yeah...**

**Ettie: So that's a lot.**

**Jennifer: Yeah...That's a lot.**

MIA analysis of this excerpt involved high-modal density in the form of spoken language, gaze, head movement and position confirming that students are engaged in the task. In frame 5 specifically, we see that Ettie displays one additional mode, head movement, to show her partner that she empathizes with her explanation of how difficult it was to study during the pandemic.



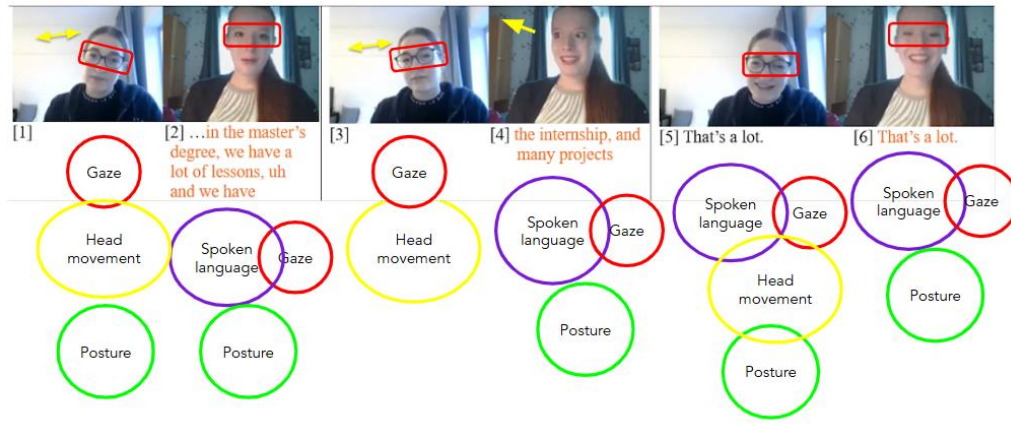


Figure 3: Modal configuration of pair 1: Teacher training

Concerning our analysis of cognitive engagement (table 4), we identified ‘making an un/favourable comparison’ as a new high-level action to explain instances where students made a verbal comparison between their partner’s country and their own and added which they preferred. Pair 2, did this the most with Cora and Manon finding aspects of their partner’s culture preferable to their own. For example, when discussing their education systems and national curricula, Manon acknowledges that she had not thought about the strengths and weaknesses of the French education system before Cora asked her if the same curriculum benefits mixed-level classes.

*“Yeah, yeah that’s a question I’ve never really considered before, like, would that be interesting to have different curriculums because obviously, in some subjects you will have kids who will be like bored because they’re they have like lots of skills, but you will also have lots of kids who are struggling, so yeah never consider that actually.”* (Manon)

This high-level action is also seen in the post-reflective tasks as Maria reflected on the teacher qualifications in France and in the Netherlands, finding that she preferred the Dutch system better:

*“Compared to us, they are educated in a very theoretical way. They only have to do a 3 to 6 week internship and they aren’t even expected to teach full lessons. This seems very weird to me, to be honest. How do you improve your teaching skills if you aren’t even able to bring them to practice? So their system is a bit confusing to me and it has made me much happier with the Dutch system.”* (Maria)

Next, we discuss our findings overall from the study.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.2.1 Tip 1: Design a task question around ‘finding something in common’ with their partner

Although we asked students to discuss something they have in common with their partner based on their pre-task Moodle post, few students did this. We believe this may have been because we gave several optional questions for students to use in task 2, and that students likely felt that describing



their educational systems and English teacher qualifications were the most important parts of the task.

Our multimodal analysis shows that discussing something they have in common or a shared interest were engaging aspects of the task and that this should be highlighted in task design. For example, we suggest limiting the number of questions for students to answer to help them focus more on finding a common fact or interest, such as:

Task instructions: In the meeting with your VE partner, discuss the education system in your country, such as how it is structured, and the qualifications needed to become an English teacher.

Additionally, find at least one fact or interest that you and your partner share.

Another suggestion for promoting engagement is to have students create the task questions themselves. Zambert and Zhang (2019) that students who designed questions for their partner were more engaged in the task; therefore, the pre-task could have the instructions above plus a few blank lines asking students to write three questions for their partner based on information their partner has told them. However, teachers should give some guidance on the type of questions students are encouraged to create for the discussion with their partner.

#### *4.2.2 Tip 2: Ensure students are asking information-seeking questions*

We found that our students, especially pair 1, asked a lot of questions of their partner during the task. Particularly the Dutch students asked more questions than their French counterparts (55/32), yet when we delve deeper into the *type* of question asked, we see that most of these questions are simple questions with yes/no responses. These types of questions, as opposed information seeking questions (ones which begin with why, what and/or how), often do not lead to further discussion. As such, we suggest that teachers train students to ask their partner questions which will lead towards more depth. Belz (2005) finds that questions which ask for information provide more opportunities for sharing and learning about their partner's culture - thus increasing one of the main benefits of VE: intercultural awareness. Providing these questions stems (what -, how -, why -) to students prior to meeting their partner can result in deeper levels of learner engagement.

#### *4.2.3 Tip 3: Design task questions that encourage students to talk about challenges in their studies/teaching placements*

Our analysis of students' attitudinal engagement shows that students who discussed challenges were engaged by showing empathy towards their partner. For example, Jennifer and Ettie (pair 1) talked about how difficult it was to study during the pandemic and how much work their courses required of them. Manon and Cora discussed the (unfavorable) work conditions of teachers and native English speakers' unwillingness to learn a second language. As shown in figures 2 and 3, we see that students employ more modes in times of heightened engagement, often using a minimum of three modes. Using gaze, moving their body and positioning themselves towards their partner supported their communication. Indeed, talking about these challenges openly helped to strengthen their relationship as VE partners as they shared a difficulty that both had experienced.

We suggest that teachers design task questions that ask students to talk about a difficulty in their studies or in a teaching placement as this can not become a means of engaging more in the task but can also foster professional development by seeking advice or just the ear of a peer. It is important,



however, that students are given some phrases which can help to discuss these challenges so that students feel supported in the VE. This suggestion is detailed more in the next tip.

#### *4.2.4 Tip 4: Provide sentences for students to discuss cultural differences openly*

It's important to remember that although VE has often been hailed as an opportunity for students to learn intercultural awareness and competences, putting together people from different cultures can lead to culture clashes and miscommunication breakdown if students are not prepared or trained in what to do in these situations should they arise. Gutiérrez et al. (2021) has created a training manual for VE teachers to train students in discussing cultural differences openly in the form of sentences that students could have at hand during synchronous meetings if needed.

In our case study, we did not provide these sentences as we felt it was unlikely that cultural clashes would occur and while this was generally true, Maria's comments in her post-task reflection about how Dutch and French teachers are trained could have been broached in the online meeting, but perhaps she did not feel comfortable sharing an opinion that could be perceived by her partner as overly critical. This is perhaps especially true when meeting for the first time and wanting to be polite. Desiring to come across as polite was also mentioned by another Dutch student, Ettie. Perhaps providing sentences in how to discuss these differences in teacher training could have been profitable for both students, but was a missed opportunity. Therefore, we recommend phrases such as those in Gutiérrez et al. (2021) for promoting open communication and thus engagement.

## 5. Conclusion

Our investigation into assessing students' engagement in online tasks from a multimodality perspective has shown that excerpts that we identified as students engaging in the task were supported by high-intensity modal configurations confirming students' engagement. This has enabled us to therefore identify several recommendations in VE task design for fostering partner orientation in online tasks. The four task designs that we have recommended include: i) including question(s) in the task design which ask students to identify a common interest/shared fact; ii) ensure that students are asking questions to generate, not close, discussion; iii) design question(s) for students to discuss a challenge or struggle; and iv) provide training to students to mitigate possible cultural clashes.

These tips add to the literature in learner engagement concerning online tasks and we call for future studies to continue to investigate learner engagement in virtual exchanges with special focus on task design.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What benefits do you foresee your students receiving from a virtual exchange?
2. Which country would be an ideal partner school and why?
3. How much would you say your students are currently engaged in class?
4. Do you think your students would be more engaged if they were completing tasks online? Why or why not?
5. What technical issues might you have with organising a VE exchange? How would you overcome these? Who could help you?
6. How much do you involve your students in task design currently? Would it be possible to involve them more?



7. What problems do you imagine could occur if you asked your students to discuss challenges with their VE partner? How could these be resolved?
8. What possible cultural clashes could you envision in a VE with the country you selected in question 2? What sentences from Gutiérrez et al.'s training manual would help you?
9. Despite these potential challenges, what benefits would your students receive from these discussions?

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