University students' lived experiences of developing Active Empathic Listening skills in online synchronous learning

by

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This doctorate is dedicated in loving memory to Marika, Frank and Lucie Fromm.

Personal Statement and Acknowledgements

I started my doctoral journey in 2018 the day before my wedding to my husband, Kurt, without whose love and support I would not have had the confidence to even start, yet alone complete. Several teachers at various stages of my earlier education did not expect me to succeed or go to university. I therefore dedicate my doctorate to my late parents and grandmother whose care and commitment knew no bounds. This study means so much to me and is the culmination of a long, fascinating but challenging educational journey.

My doctoral journey started in a university library in early 2018 when I decided it was time for a new start and to further my career after many years of being an hourly-paid English Language and Academic Skills Visiting Lecturer. I also wanted to read and learn outside of my subject to expand my horizons.

2019 and 2020 were especially challenging years. My mother passed away unexpectedly after a short illness in 2019. Then, in March 2020 I lost my job a few days before Lockdown. This meant loss of contact to students and, at first, potential student participants for my study. So, my doctorate took a new path, and through some voluntary teaching, I subsequently had the opportunity to teach voluntarily in three different university schools for my EdD, where I have been honoured to meet some fantastic students and colleagues, despite the sudden move online. Online teaching is not my first choice of learning environment. Nevertheless, online synchronous learning gave me the possibility to continue, develop new teaching, research and technical skills to complete my study from a new and exciting perspective.

Most importantly, I wish to acknowledge *all* the students who attended the Online Academic Conversation Clubs during the Covid-19 Lockdown period in 2020-2021 and 2021-2022, whether they were interviewed or not. Their commitment to the clubs, held outside timetabled programme sessions, at such an unprecedented time warrants not only thanks but huge applause. To the ten brilliant West African students who engaged in the clubs and participated in the interviews - a massive 'thank you'. They have helped this doctorate to come alive and have provided their

individual and personal voices of their lived experiences of the clubs. It was an honour and an awe-inspiring experience for me to meet, teach and learn from such exemplary students.

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I will always be most grateful to my colleagues in the Centre of Academic English for their kindness and friendship over so many years. I have learnt so much from you all. I thank my colleagues in the School of Health & Social Work for their support, especially Richard Matovu, Education Technologist, for his help and advice with the Podcast. Also, special thanks to my friends and family all over the world for being there and listening.

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Abstract

In Higher Education, good relationships between peers are essential for students to learn from each other, develop critical thinking skills, participate actively and make friends. Good relationships may be developed in small group learning conversations, which can take place within timetabled learning sessions with a tutor present or can be arranged by students outside timetabled sessions. During and in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns, the process for students to learn and socialise together in small group learning conversations, as well as to build relationships with their peers was problematic because of continuing restrictions on meeting in person. Relationships needed to be built online, requiring some development of appropriate communication skills.

The focus of this study was to encourage the development of communication skills between student peers in online synchronous academic conversation clubs in which Active Empathic Listening skills were facilitated by a tutor researcher. Active Empathic Listening is a set of skills chosen because these skills are likely to encourage attentive listening and active participation, which can create empathy and good relationships between group members. Active Empathic Listening skills were developed and practised by university students in small group learning conversations synchronously in these online clubs. Participating student club members, who were West Africans studying Nursing at a university in England, agreed to take part in two semi-structured interviews conducted by the tutor researcher.

A reflexive approach informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was employed in the research. Findings suggest that learning and practising Active Empathic Listening skills in these online synchronous conversation clubs led to student participants perceiving an improvement in their ability to listen with attention, paraphrase orally to clarify understanding, think critically, actively participate in online synchronous learning conversations, as well as build good relationships with other club members. Student participants revealed that they could transfer these Active Empathic Listening skills into their academic speaking and writing, and use the listening and speaking skills they have gained within their professional practice while on placement in healthcare contexts. This study contributes to knowledge of the impact of Active Empathic Listening skills' development in Higher Education.

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1. Introduction

1.1.   Outline

Small group learning conversations among students are important for exchanging ideas and developing their critical thinking at university. In my role as an experienced Language teacher and Academic Skills tutor, I have noticed that many university students do not appear to actively participate in small group learning conversations, which can have a negative effect on relationships between students, as well as the development of their critical thinking. In other words, when students feel at ease with each other in a small learning group then it is more likely that they will be able to learn from each other, exchange ideas and develop their criticality.

Indeed, most adults are able to reflect back on their education, as I can, and remember how 'who you sat next to' made such an enormous difference to their educational experience and outcomes at various stages in their education and usually afterwards. At school, relationships extend from the classroom to the rest of the building and playground, and at university from the lecture theatres and seminar classrooms to the wider campus. Nowadays, at school and university relationships can be built on online platforms and social media, established with student peers (although some are virtually established 'friends' that can carry risk). Relationships between students from a range of ethnicities, backgrounds and countries are of the utmost importance in HE (Gilbert, 2016; Papadopoulos, 2017; Thomas, 2020) in multicultural universities, which must also extend to those graduating into the workplace (Diamond et al., 2011). Furthermore, relationships between teachers and students are also paramount to the learning experience and success in HE (Bovill, 2020). This dissertation focuses on peer relationships in Higher Education (HE) in small group learning conversations.

Small group learning conversations are important for group interaction in HE because they can be facilitated by a tutor within a seminar class, and they can frequently occur outside timetabled sessions. Outside timetabled sessions these conversations can be useful as preparation or as an extension of classroom learning activities. Small group learning conversations can be arranged by the

students themselves, who might be learning together towards a group project or assessment, wish to provide general learning support or have some advice in peer groups, such as understanding and thinking about a lecture, an academic text, clarifying assignment instructions or working on a group presentation. These conversations can provide opportunities to later socialise and make friends in the wider university environment. These friendships are, in my opinion, essential for intermingling with students of other cultures and backgrounds too.

Student friendships may require some tutor input, at least for initial introductions, because of personal learner factors, such as shyness and being new in the country of study or learning environment. Students who integrate across cultures in the wider university community tend to be successful in their degrees (Massi et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2023) and enjoy the university experience (Jones et al., 2023). Integration across cultures can afford a greater possibility for graduates to be employable in multinational teams in their future careers (Diamond et al., 2011). University students at all levels can join small group learning conversations in an online, in person or hybrid environment. Moreover, small group learning conversations can contribute to a considerable amount of learning time for students and provide valuable peer support.

In HE, a small group learning conversation involves two or more students listening and talking with each other and exchanging ideas. For a small group learning conversation to be successful students need to feel at ease with each other so that they can listen to each other and learn, as well as contribute their own ideas to the group. Learning relationships, belongingness and personal factors make a difference to how a student feels in a particular group (Jones et al., 2023). Indeed, learning relationships, belongingness and personal factors can all affect active participation and cooperation in learning conversations between student peers. Building good learning relationships between students is essential to active participation and learning in HE (Bovill, 2020). If a student does not have a good relationship to their peers, then they are likely to feel uncomfortable to share their ideas with them and participate in the conversation. Jones et al. (2023), leading educationalists at two universities in England, maintain that a sense of belonging to a university and programme of study is likely to positively affect relationships between students that is critical to both learning and the wider university

experience. This is also the case in online synchronous communication in which social presence is considered important (Zhang et al., 2023), hence students actively being there despite the physical distance.

Personal factors are also very important to consider regarding small group learning conversations (SGLCs). For example, 'shyness' and confidence in speaking are likely to have an impact on active student participation, in this case, speaking in a SGLC. Consideration towards 'shyness' is necessary because attitudes towards it vary across different cultures and educational systems (Liu and Jackson, 2008; Pattapong, 2010; Akinbode, 2015; Arunasalam, 2016; and Machi, 2018). For example, in Britain and the US, shyness may be regarded negatively but in East Asia it can be considered respectful (Liu and Jackson, 2008; Akinbode, 2015; Machi, 2018). Nevertheless, it might be difficult for a 'shy' student to speak up and feel confident in class, especially one who might be anxious of making errors, which my non-published small scale research project towards this doctorate has suggested is significant with reference to a questionnaire circulated among international, mainly Chinese, students between 2018 and 2019. Those students who might talk too much, 'group monopolisers', may also create difficulties for group relationships (Gilbert, 2015; Gilbert, 2016). For example, Theo Gilbert Professor of Compassion-focused Pedagogy, maintains that 'the behaviour of a monopoliser, a shy non-contributor and a non-reader' are frequently problematic student characteristics within university seminar groups (Gilbert, 2016:1).

Through my teaching in three different Schools at one university in England, I have found that Active Empathic Listening is a set of skills that appears to be beneficial to students' active participation in SGLCs in online synchronous learning. Active Empathic Listening involves Listening with Attention to group members, Oral Paraphrasing what has been said and Asking Open Questions for elaboration, which I explain in detail in Chapter 3. Historically, Carl Rogers and associates (1951) were the first to discuss Active Empathic Listening, also known as Active Listening (Rogers and Farson, 1957/1987), within the field of Group Psychotherapy and Business Psychology. I have found a gap in research in Active Empathic Listening especially in the field of Higher Education and in online synchronous learning. Therefore, I have focused on Active Empathic Listening in Higher Education in online synchronous learning in this doctorate.

Communication difficulties were exacerbated because of the Covid-19 Lockdowns making it challenging for students to build peer relationships. The impact of Covid-19 Lockdowns and restrictions on socialising led to learning and teaching moving online in England in March 2020 (Mahase, 2020a; Mahase, 2020b), and globally. These legal restrictions on socialising created unprecedented challenges, such as isolation and mental health issues, for most students (King, 2022), and tutors, at that time. In the context of the pandemic Mansi in Jones et al. (2023) asked her students at a university in England about their online experiences during the pandemic and learned that they missed a sense of community and meeting other students.

In consideration of the lack of a sense of community and possibilities to meet during the pandemic for HE students, I decided to set up and facilitate online synchronous academic conversation clubs between 2020 and 2022 for a few groups of university students. Hence, I started these club groups in two different Schools and an Academic English Centre within one university in England with a focus on developing and practising club members' Active Empathic Listening (AEL) skills. The aims of the clubs were to facilitate online meetings for students to develop and practise AEL skills while discussing lectures and texts of their choice, as well as, importantly, to provide the opportunity for students to meet, talk and make friends outside timetabled classes.

Zoom™, which was popular at the time, was the online platform I selected for the clubs that also should have been familiar to students because it was one of the platforms used in timetabled learning sessions across the university. I also chose Zoom because it offered a user-friendly way for me to quickly set up breakout rooms during online synchronous meetings, where students could converse in smaller groups for a selected number of minutes and then reconvene as a whole group in the main room. After several weekly club meetings, I used semi-structured individual interviews to explore the lived experiences of some of the students who had attended these clubs. My area of interest and focus of this Doctorate in Education (EdD) became *university students' lived experiences of developing Active Empathic Listening skills developed and practised in online synchronous academic conversation clubs in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns*.

1.2.   Context

In 2020, and in the context of online synchronous learning during the pandemic, I started to set up and facilitate a few club groups with a focus on Active Empathic Listening in two schools and one department at the same university, which were the School of Health and Social Work, the Business School and Centre of Academic English. International students on some undergraduate and postgraduate programmes within these schools were invited to attend the clubs voluntarily in their free time first in the 2020 - 2021 club groups. I subsequently established further club groups for both international and home students in 2021 – 2022 within the School of Nursing.

In the first year, MSc Pre-registration Nursing students (in the School of Health and Social Work) attended the clubs the most regularly compared with the other two schools. Therefore, I decided to conduct my EdD study in the context of the clubs that I had been facilitating for Pre-registration MSc student nurses. My pilot study conducted in academic year 2020 – 2021 and main study conducted in 2021 – 2022 with a larger number of participants relate to the lived experiences of participating members of the clubs that I facilitated for these Nursing students.

In addition, I had discovered that prior to starting my EdD journey there was a gap in literature in AEL skills relating to SGLCs in general, and in a further literature search in April 2020 there appeared to be no research on AEL skills in SGLCs in an online synchronous environment in HE.

All attending students could receive points towards a university-wide award scheme. They also received a certificate of attendance signed by their university School Associate Dean Student Experience illustrating the topics covered and number of sessions attended. There was no fee for the students to attend any of the clubs. It is important to emphasise that, during the time of both my pilot and main study, student club members attended the clubs outside of their programme timetables whilst in university learning blocks in the almost no free time they had. I facilitated the club sessions voluntarily, being that they were part of my EdD study. It is important to stress that the learning and teaching, as well as the research in my study was conducted entirely in an online synchronous environment.

1.2.1. Pilot Study

I started to facilitate an online academic conversation club with a focus on AEL skills for international MSc Pre-registration Adult Nursing and Mental Health Nursing students at the end of 2020, who had all arrived for the first time in England in September 2020 during a Lockdown. With permission from a head of Nursing, student lists were supplied to me and I contacted those students by direct email in January 2021 to find student volunteers to take part. The online academic conversation club consisted of six one-hour online synchronous meetings in the first part, and in the second part there were four weekly two-hour meetings. Following ethics approval and programme leader approval. I interviewed some of the club students individually after each part to find out about their lived experiences in the club. Despite variations in numbers of students attending sessions each week between two and seven, I decided to ask those students who had attended five or more times whether they wished to continue with the clubs in the next semester and for their consent to be interviewed.

I interviewed the same five students twice, hence, after each part of the club. All the students (n=5) interviewed declared that they were over 30, previously educated in the English language, had completed their entire previous education in Nigeria or Ghana. There were three female and two male students in the club. (80% of the students on the MSc Pre-registration Nursing programme who started in 2020 were Black or Black British). The five participating students were each offered an additional online hour with me after the interviews to talk about academic or personal study concerns and/or a friendly chat as a 'thank you' for their time to be interviewed.

The sessions in the first part of the club in my pilot study focused on getting to know other members, sharing members' experiences of online learning, talking about recent lectures and discussing academic texts of members' choice. Within these sessions AEL skills were discussed, presented, developed and reflected on. For example, how to paraphrase orally, which included some examples of Oral Paraphrasing phrases (such as 'So, you mean …?). The final session covered some revision. In each session the students were given opportunities to talk together in the main room with me, then in the Zoom breakout rooms in small groups together

without me being present. I only joined the breakout rooms if they requested and had questions. Before each breakout room conversation, I allowed a few minutes of individual preparation time ~~to~~ for club members to select familiar lectures and texts, or topics they had recently been considering, and some thinking time. I usually discussed with the group, how much time they thought they might need for each breakout room conversation before setting these up. After the breakout rooms students summarised their conversations for the whole group in the main room.

The second part of this club was ~~based~~ mainly based on a co-constructed mini research project, which started with revising what we had discussed in the first part of the club, relating to the Active Empathic Listening skills members had developed. They further discussed and reflected on these skills, and in two breakout rooms worked on devising three questions per room to ask the members of the other group. The questions were about their lived experiences of AEL in the first part of the club. Then I briefly explained about how to write open questions for a small scale-research questionnaire. The questions were put in the chat, which I noted and then sent to the students in a Word document before the next meeting. At the next meeting, we chose three out of the six total questions from the two groups to focus on. Students discussed these in their breakout rooms. Finally, each group wrote a short text in their respective room with only minimal intervention from me. These were written in the chat and, in the same procedure as the questions, copied and emailed to them for final discussion and editing. By the end of the sessions the club members had written three short paragraphs about their findings that subsequently were used in a collaborative journal article with me to which they had contributed (Fromm et al., 2021). The following citation is an extract from the article, as written in club members' words.

> Paraphrasing is another approach that students can use to get the most out of lectures, whether they are in person or online. Students were able to understand and comprehend lecture subjects covered in online lectures, analyse various research papers, and avoid plagiarism when writing academic essays by using Oral Paraphrasing.
>
> In conclusion, Oral Paraphrasing is beneficial to listening more actively; it enhances communication between students when in breakout rooms, and subsequently also helps writing skills (Fromm et al., 2021:4).

Because there were only five participants available for interview in my pilot study, I decided to set up, facilitate and focus on similar clubs and activities in my main study the following academic year (2021 – 2022) to attempt to have a larger future sample for my main doctoral research. The above citation, therefore, adds to the context as an introduction to my study. It suggests that Listening with Attention and Oral Paraphrasing, two important skills within an Active Empathic Listening model, appear to be beneficial to HE students in online synchronous learning, which warrants further exploration and analysis of AEL.

1.2.2. Main study - Outline

I started discussions with Nursing programme leads in June 2021 to find students who might wish to volunteer to join the club at the beginning of academic year 2021 – 2022 starting in September 2021. However, it was a few months before the club groups could start because I needed to wait for programme leads to first receive student timetables before groups could be organised. In addition, there were timetabling issues because a limited amount of in person classes had begun in the first semester of the 2021 – 2022 academic year (which started in September 2021) and because of some continuing social distancing measures in place. This meant fewer students were permitted in classrooms than before the pandemic, and approximately half of the teaching at the university was being facilitated online that year.

Because of these and other challenges, the first club group that I facilitated in that year did not start until February 2022, with a second group of students on the same programme and year group approximately six weeks later. All the students in the club that year, who had volunteered to join were in their second year (final year) of a Pre-registration Mental Health programme. The two club groups then became the context of my main study, in other words, the club groups in 2021 – 2022. One reason that I chose to continue with the club in that year, rather than running it again for new first year students, was because two club members who had attended the previous year had insisted they wanted to continue. There were no pre-course activities, other than that the two members who had continued from their first year were already familiar with the AEL learning concepts of the club.

For the club in my main study (2021 – 2022) there were two club groups initially because the students on the actual programme were divided into two different placement blocks. Both club groups consisted of two parts. The first part of each club was organised into five one-hour weekly meetings and in the second part there were two meetings of two hours. Club activities in the first part were similar to my pilot study in that Listening with Attention and Oral Paraphrasing were the focus and members could also choose to have conversations about lectures and texts. There was not enough time to include Asking Open Questions in the first part, although it was mentioned, but this skill was then included in the first hour of the first meeting in the second part of the club.

The second part of club initially focused on revision of the first part and then mainly centred on the students' preparation and creation of a recorded conversation for the School of Health and Social Work's monthly Podcast about their experiences in the club and their learning of AEL skills. Yeh et al. (2021) explain that Podcasting can be beneficial to university students' listening and speaking skills (which are AEL skills). Thus, it is likely that the Podcast activity would further contribute to the development of club members' AEL skills and critical thinking. However, the article by Yeh et al. (2021) relates to speakers of other languages and the students in the clubs did not need English language development because they had all been previously educated in the English language medium in various countries. Examples and details of activities in each session, including some materials, are provided in Chapter 4 (Developing online academic conversation clubs).

During both parts of the club, I occasionally mentioned that club members could continue the conversation in their own time if they wished, but as such there were no tasks set between sessions because these final year nursing students were extremely busy with their studies, placements and other commitments, and they were attending the club outside of timetabled sessions. I did not set any post club activities either. As mentioned, conversations in the club sessions were focused on developing AEL skills to discuss lectures and texts of their choice while employing AEL skills (as explained in Chapter 4, Section 5, and in my findings and discussion chapters). Club sessions did not include conversations about practice placements.

In relation to club members, in the first part of the club, between three and seven MSc Pre-registration Mental Health Nursing students attended the weekly sessions in two separate groups. Out of the two groups, ten students were available to be interviewed (n=10) after the first part of the club, and of these, five continued with the second part of the club and were interviewed again at the end (n=5). Like the first year, all participating club members in the club for my main study could receive points towards a university reward scheme and an attendance certificate, whether or not they were interviewed. Those who were interviewed were invited to an additional individual academic skills or general conversation with me, if they wished, in gratitude for their time to be interviewed.

The next section of this chapter introduces my chosen methodology and the epistemological approach, which informs my study. This is followed by an introductory section explaining my positionality as both the tutor and researcher.

1.3. Methodology - Outline

I have adopted a qualitative interpretative paradigm in my study. This involved consideration and interpretation of participants' spoken accounts of their lived experiences in the clubs arising from semi-structured interviews that were automatically transcribed by Zoom software. My approach is informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which was developed by the psychologist Jonathan Smith in 1996. In brief, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) involves interpretation of participants' meaning and an in-depth exploration of each participant's lived experience (phenomenology), and ideographic analysis of each individual participant in turn before analysing all of the participants' data in the sample together (Smith et al., 2009; Noon, 2018; Nizza et al., 2021; Smith and Nizza, 2022). I chose to employ semi-structured interviews of consenting participants, who had attended the club in the academic year 2021 – 2022.

In my attempt to render my findings transparent, I have kept three types of journals. These are a Reflective Journal of my thoughts about my own development of AEL, a Teaching Log of notes taken in learning sessions and a Reflexive Notebook of the research process. Consideration of findings from my

journals is included in a separate discussion chapter, after the chapter of my main findings relating to the semi-structured interviews among club participants. In my teaching, for example, I have included sections from my Teaching Log taken during and after the clubs, including some of my own learning from what students said in club meetings. I have also included my reflexivity in my data analysis procedure. Quotes from my tutor journals are included in my findings and I have added a reflexive section to most chapters. Nevertheless, being a tutor researcher, some unconscious bias is inevitable.

The focus of my doctoral study is on Active Empathic Listening skills within the context of the online synchronous academic conversation club groups that I facilitated in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns, with the club groups that I ran between February 2022 and June 2022 and subsequently studied. To provide my rationale and more background to my study, the next section explains my experience in learning and teaching about AEL skills, which started in 2016 before the pandemic.

1.4. Tutor researcher's experience of teaching Active Empathic Listening

My journey towards my EdD topic, AEL, began in 2015 when teaching a group of international, mainly Chinese first language Mandarin speakers, on a Pre-Sessional English and Academic Skills (PSE) university preparation programme that was taught entirely in person. I noticed many of the students were not speaking very much in small group learning conversations in seminars and appeared to lack confidence in contributing orally to class conversations. In other words, speaking in groups in classroom discussions was often limited. To be admitted onto a future undergraduate or postgraduate programme of study, one of the PSE programme's assessments was to pass a seminar speaking test. The seminar speaking test required students to discuss an academic journal article they had used in a project through conversing together orally in a small group of between three and five students. During one of the seminar speaking preparation classes, I suddenly had the idea to ask the students to begin by working in pairs and in their own words to explain to their partner one sentence that they had read in an academic text. Following that, I asked the students to paraphrase back orally

the original sentence to the first speaker in each pair. They appeared to do this well, so I then gradually extended the activity step by step to include more sentences and repeat the activity in slightly larger groups of students.

In 2018 I reflected on this Oral Paraphrasing activity when talking to international students in an In-sessional English (Academic Skills') speaking class who were already following various degree courses. In the In-Sessional English class, the students and I had been talking about issues of confidence when speaking in class. It was then that I remembered the Oral Paraphrasing activity, in the PSE class two years previously, that I decided to search for literature on the topic of Oral Paraphrasing with the view to possible further research towards my EdD.

My initial search revealed no research on Oral Paraphrasing in HE. Through my reading I began to realise the importance of Listening with Attention to be able to paraphrase adequately, thus, both Oral Paraphrasing and Listening with Attention are skills appear to work together. In the context of HE, I later considered that Asking Open Questions would be useful as a skill, which could potentially benefit elaboration of conversation topics in SGLCs and aid critical thinking, too. Therefore, I refer to Active Empathic Listening skills in the HE context in terms of these three important communication skills, Listening with Attention, Oral Paraphrasing and Asking Open Questions. I discuss the very limited amount of literature on AEL and these three skills in depth in Chapter 3, where I also compare the literature on AEL that can be used in classrooms and, the even more limited literature on AEL skills in online synchronous communication.

1.4.1. My position as tutor researcher

Being the sole tutor and researcher in this study, it is necessary to clarify my position. A detailed explanation of positionality in studies conducted by tutor researchers is important to explain their view of the research in which they are involved and attempt to mitigate some of the bias, which occurs in qualitative studies (Cohen et al., 2018).

As both a tutor and researcher, I am interested in SGLCs and how these may help mutual understanding between student group members and closer understanding of what is being discussed. In other words, I would like students to develop close

understanding between each other and between myself and students. However, this doctorate is limited to student peer conversations and relationships between students rather than between the tutor and students. In addition, it is important to me to attempt to avoid 'unconscious bias, prejudice, cultural misconceptions and racism [that] exist within many settings but are often not surfaced or explored'; an important point explained in an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion booklet published by a university School of Education in England (Clark et al., 2024:1). The context of this doctorate is limited to learning conversations between students in small group online synchronous communication in the academic conversation clubs that I set up and facilitated.

I take the view that it is important to strive to understand each other literally, personally and morally, including across cultures and internationally. This is important to me personally having experienced some discrimination at times during my education, in my working life as a teacher and employment.

In addition, the context and timing of my work is important because of the need for better understanding of others across cultures and borders. The appalling murder of George Floyd in Minnesota, US, in May 2020 (Crump et al., 2020) and the unlawful Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Baumont and Jones, 2022) are examples of growing racist and nationalist politics globally at the time of conducting the research for my EdD. Therefore, the need for closer understanding in diverse contexts, such as a university where there are students from a range of backgrounds, including international students, is paramount.

In learning conversations, I have found that Active Empathic Listening skills appear to benefit close understanding, as well as exchanging ideas and developing critical thinking. As Nancy Kline (1999:36) in the field of Business Psychology emphasises, attentive listening 'ignites the human mind [and] the quality of your attention determines the quality of other people's attention'. This point relates to both Active Empathic Listening, which can be conducive to learning and critical thinking in Higher Education, which requires exploration within the HE context.

1.5.   Research Question

My Research Question considers how participating students in the online synchronous club groups that I facilitated had practised and developed their AEL skills at the time where there were changing restrictions on socialising because of Covid-19. Smith and Nizza (2022) suggest that in an IPA approach the Research Question should be focused on a 'specific contextualised experience'. Therefore, I have based my question on participating university students' development of Active Empathic Listening skills in the club groups in my main study, which I had facilitated in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns. ~~In addition, as Smith and Osborn (2015) advise, I have tried to keep my Research Question broad to allow for substantial exploration.~~

My Research Question is:

What are participating university students' lived experiences and perspectives of developing Active Empathic Listening skills practised in online synchronous academic conversation clubs in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns?

Smith and Osborn (2015) advise to keep Research Questions broad to allow for substantial exploration. Nevertheless, I have added the following six sub-questions for clarification to answer in my discussion (chapter 10). These six sub-questions address participating students' learning experiences over time, what was said about developing AEL skills in online synchronous learning (OSL) in the clubs, some personal learner factors that may have influenced what was said and relationships to other club members in the clubs. In relation to my Research Question, these sub-questions also discuss students' development of academic skills and learning, including in their nursing studies.

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1. What do participating students say about their Active Empathic Listening skills development:
   a. … before attending the clubs?
   b. … after attending Part 1 of the clubs?
   c. … after attending Part 2 of the clubs and reflecting on both parts of the club combined?
2. What do participating students say about developing their Active Empathic Listening skills, that was:

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a. … Easy?
b. … Difficult?

3. In relation to Active Empathic Listening skills development, what do participating students say about their personal learner factors regarding:
   a. Shyness and confidence,
   b. Participation and engagement,
   c. Motivation,
   d. Identity,
   e. First time studying in the UK?

4. What do participating students say about their relationships to other student members in the clubs?

5. What do participating students say about their online synchronous study experiences:
   a. In general
   b. In relation to the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns
   c. Their learning in the clubs?

6. What do participating students say about their development of AEL skills in relation to:
   a. Academic Skills?
   b. The MSc Mental Health Nursing Programme?

Table 1-1 Research sub-questions

1.6.   Tutor researcher reflexivity and reflections - Definitions

My reflexivity and reflections have been a significant aspect of my study throughout my doctoral journey. In my study, I describe my reflexivity in relation to the research I have conducted and my reflections in relation to my teaching. I am aware that my study is influenced by my thoughts, background, education, personal history, culture and values. Related to reflexivity, Greenbank (2003) believes that research cannot be 'value free' in that a person's values are based on social, educational and political beliefs and background. Indeed, I am aware that my background, culture, lived experiences, including my professional experience as a teacher, underline the whole research process and my thinking. In her book, Kim Etherington (2004) explains and defines researcher reflexivity as:

> 'The capacity of the researcher to acknowledge how their own experiences and contexts (which might be fluid and changing) inform

the process and outcomes of inquiry. If we can be aware of how our own thoughts and feelings, culture, environment and social and personal history inform us as we dialogue with participants, transcribe their conversations with us and write our representations of the work, then perhaps we can come close to the rigour that is required of good qualitative research'.
(Etherington, 2004:31).

Here, Etherington acknowledges the importance of reflexivity in the research process and writing about it. In my study, reflexivity goes beyond the study because it incorporates my teaching. For example, how I approach my teaching and interact with students in the first place, especially in the clubs. Moreover, my study has allowed me to reflect deeply on my teaching and my attitudes to learning and teaching. In my Reflective Journal, I have considered aspects of my own learning at various times of my previous education and how that has influenced and shaped my teaching, which in turn influences my research in HE. A reflexive researcher, as Etherington (2004:16) states, is one who puts themselves into both their practice and research and can 'value transparency in relationships'. In my understanding, these relationships include those between the teacher, the students, and the reader of the research, as well as the concepts and ideas within the research and how these are made clear.

I need to consider my relationship to my students as one of power, which as the educationalist Stephen Brookfield (2017) maintains involves power dynamics between the teacher and the students and within the class. Nevertheless, regarding power dynamics, a democratic approach is beneficial (Schön, 1994; Brookfield, 2017). For example, by listening attentively to a student, the teacher can re-explain the point being taught in a way that not only the student may then understand it but that the new explanation allows the teacher to examine how the teacher teaches (Schön, 1994).

According to Donald Schön (1994), professional practice involves solving problems. In addition to professional practice, research can provide a rigorous dimension to explaining how a problem or issue might be solved and subsequently explained. My understanding of Schön's work (1994) on reflexivity is that a professional may not find it easy to put what is being discussed into words, which can lead to a knowledge gap or misunderstanding. It is through describing these gaps and in the explanation of possible solutions that the professional brings in

their reflexivity - their views, opinions and thoughts in relating to the problems being discussed. Here, Schön (1994) has coined the idea of 'reflection *in* action', which relates to a professional's thinking during an action and 'stimulated by surprise, they turn thought back on action and on the knowing, which is implicit in the action' (Schön, 1994:50). My understanding of Schön's point, is that reflection 'in action' relates to what happened at a particular time, as in during the research interview, and 'on action' means consideration of what was said in the research interview when thinking back on it later. These actions are likely to contribute to a rigorous research process. I call reflection in action 'reflexivity' and after the analysis stage I refer to the past action as 'reflection'.

My tutor journals consider both my reflexivity and reflections. I consider my notes taken during and after the research interviews in my Reflexive Notebook about my thinking. In my Reflective Journal, I have reflected on my of thinking about concepts, such as AEL, to better understand them and develop my own practice of using AEL with student participants in mind. This is important because I felt it has been necessary to reflect on my use of AEL, which I have noticed has been developing too. As both the tutor and researcher in this study I have needed to clearly explain my thinking throughout my work to make it transparent and to avoid as much unconscious bias as possible. My Teaching Log is important to consider what students and I said and did in club sessions. The Teaching Log helps me to reflect in depth on sessions, with the aim of eventually comparing my findings of the interview data with what I learnt from my reflections of the teaching.

I have included aspects of my reflection and/or reflexivity in each chapter of my dissertation as appropriate, in other words, reflections on my thoughts and learning about concepts, my reflections on teaching, and my reflexivity of the actual research process during the interviews and my reflections on the interviews afterwards. Findings in relation to my three tutor journals (Reflective Journal, Teaching Log, and Reflexive Notes) are discussed in Chapter 9. These are important because I was the sole tutor and researcher in my study.

1.7.   Dissertation organisation

To answer my Research Question, I have organised the following chapters in this dissertation accordingly. Chapter 2 is an account of various challenges for students and myself (the tutor researcher), including some of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic to further contextualise this dissertation. Chapter 3 explains the concept of AEL according to my literature review and includes a conceptual framework. Chapter 4 is a description of online communication in learning, including synchronous communication, and an explanation of how I facilitated the online synchronous academic conversation clubs, my teaching scheme of work and some examples of my teaching materials. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 explain my methodology, ontology, epistemology and how my research has been informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), followed by my research methods and data analysis approach.

Chapter 8 is provides a detailed analysis of my findings informed by an IPA approach, and Chapter 9 is an analysis of findings from my tutor journals. Chapter 10 provides discussion of my combined findings, and finally, Chapter 11 explains how this doctorate contributes to Higher Education practice.

Following this introduction, my next chapter (Chapter 2), explores some of the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic encountered in relation to certain student demographics to further contextualise my study. Finally, I explain some of my own challenges as a tutor researcher.

2. Contextual challenges for students and tutor researcher

2.1.   Outline

There were many challenges for the student participants and the tutor researcher in this study. Describing some of these challenges contributes to further background of the study's context. All students were in their second year of a two-year Pre-registration Mental Health Nursing (MHN) programme. They had started their studies in September 2020. Their studies commenced during a period of Covid-19 social distancing restrictions that were followed by a second national Lockdown in the UK from 5th November 2020 lasting four weeks (Carolan et al, 2020). Continuing social distancing measures were announced in January 2021 and all measures were relaxed in July 2021 from when it became personal choice whether to socialise in person or not (HESE, 2023).

Due to the pandemic, learning in the UK moved online in March 2020. Subsequently, mainly online only teaching continued in the academic year 2020-2021, whereas in 2021-2022 learning was blended with a mix of both online and classroom learning as restrictions to meet in person were relaxed gradually (HESE, 2023). Therefore, by the time student participants attended the online academic conversation clubs between February and June 2022, then in their second and final year, they were in the period of learning both online and in person. Nevertheless, participants, who were in their second year, would have been most affected by the pandemic and having to learn online in their first year, being that online learning was the only method of delivery and communication when they were first year students. However, some difficulties that the pandemic caused may have continued into and during their second year too. For example, the fact that the student participants in my study were not very likely to have met each other in person, or only very briefly, before the club groups in my main study began. This period has often been referred to as 'the new normal' (LeFevre, 2020).

This chapter explains some of the impacts of the pandemic on HE learning in general and some of the challenges that certain groups of students faced during this time, such as international, postgraduate, older and nursing students, who may be compared with the sample in my study. Since all participants in this

research were West African students, previously educated outside the UK, I also review some literature about students of West African ethnicities studying in the UK. Finally, I describe some of my own contextual challenges.

2.2.   Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on HE

This section provides a general background to some of the challenges HE students faced during the pandemic in 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 at universities in Britain. It has been widely reported that studying during the pandemic caused stress, anxiety, and mental health issues, for example, Carolan et al. (2020); Fromm et al. (2021); King (2022); Calica and Paterson (2023). The lack of opportunities for many students to make friends among their peers, who often did not even know names of other students on their courses (Calica and Paterson, 2023) led to isolation, stress (Carolan et al. 2020; King, 2022) and depression (King, 2022).

When I started teaching online synchronously for the first time in November 2020, during the time of my pilot study in a club for international MSc Management and MSc International Business students, I noticed the sad look on these students' faces. This became my rationale for starting the online synchronous academic conversation clubs. From our first conversations when I was becoming acquainted with the five students, who joined the club in the first two meetings, and they were also getting to know each other, I learned and sensed some of their frustration at not meeting other students (and lecturers) in person. In a reflective article submitted in 2020 (Fromm, 2022a), I mentioned that not meeting other students must have been particularly difficult for new international students, who would have been dreaming of studying in England and visiting London for the first time. This contributed to the rationale for setting up and facilitating more clubs for students at the university where I was teaching. I was interested in providing opportunities for students to meet outside timetabled sessions and to provide a 'safe psychological space' for learning online, in which students might have the opportunity and confidence to talk and learn from each other. Holley and Steiner (2005) explain why these psychologically safe spaces are important because students may be anxious of the risk that they may associate with making errors and hence feel embarrassed, a point I have considered in my Reflective Journal, and which I experienced at times in my education.

The isolation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic that was experienced by most students contributed to anonymity (Gribble and Wardrop, 2021), which meant that building relationships with other students who started their courses in 2020 was challenging when their only means of contact to other students was online. This led to considerable stress and anxiety. For example, at Manchester University in England barriers that resembled prison fences had been erected to keep students confined to their university accommodation that caused so much stress students pulled them down (Hall et al., 2020). At the time I heard many students and tutors complain that when students were in online synchronous sessions with cameras off it was like looking into little windows that were no more than 'black holes'. Indeed, the camera problem contributed to anonymity in synchronous learning for many students, which negatively affected their learning conversations, confidence (Jones et al. 2023) and motivation (Jayasundara, 2023).

In addition, because good relationships and friendships are major factors in course satisfaction and participation (Bovill, 2020), students who were new to HE institutions especially missed out on the wider university experience, such as extra-curricular activities, and opportunities to make friends. Gravett and Winstone (2022) state that those students who required support during the pandemic often experienced difficulties accessing it. Lack of support or inadequate provision by universities for students to access support is likely to have contributed to mental health issues for students, a period of dormancy and/or withdrawal from universities.

Poor mental health was reported as a consequence of the pandemic among large numbers of students in 2020-2021 (the time of my pilot study), and to a latter extent during my main study in 2021-2022 (HESA, 2023; Kohls et al., 2023). According to a survey in April 2022 of 5474 students at six universities in Eastern Germany (Kohls et al., 2023), the pandemic effects on mental health appear to have decreased from 2020 to 2021 and further to 2022. Nevertheless, they report that high incidences of mental health issues continued to prevail in 2022, and of concern was a rise in suicidal indention from 2020 to 2022. Indeed, the majority of students studying during the pandemic globally are likely to have experienced isolation and stress to some extent.

The impact of the pandemic-driven transition to online learning presented learning and psychological challenges for students. In addition, there were challenges for many students and tutors, which I describe in the next section of this chapter.

2.3.   Online learning challenges for HE students

The sudden shift to online learning in the pandemic necessitated familiarity with new technology and the need to learn it quickly, especially for those who were less familiar with it. Many students suffer distress associated with difficulties with computer literacy (Carolan, 2020). Losh (2021) stresses that some universities presume students have the required technical skills for online learning, yet a considerable number of students lack them. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that much of the technical skills required to access learning online would have been new to most students.

Furthermore, connection problems can also cause difficulties (Grondin et al., 2019). Indeed, nursing students in Scotland reported frustration because of the time taken to resolve technical issues and access learning, including synchronous sessions (Calica and Paterson, 2023). Jones et al. (2023) state that connectivity issues often occur because of digital poverty. Digital poverty refers to students who may not be able to afford or access the equipment and the connections required for online learning (Jones et al., 2023). It can also mean students not having the personal space in their accommodation to access it.

Jones et al. (2023) maintain that there are disadvantages for students who might lack previous digital education. In addition, it is essential for educators to be aware of the wider digital experience and impact on HE students.

> 'The reality of this is that this concept denotes more than just general IT proficiency; it requires learners to engage more critical faculties such as thinking skills and using appropriate etiquette expected in online communities' (Jones et al., 2023:74).

Jones et al.'s (2023) point about online communities is relevant to belonging to HE institutions and small group learning conversations (SGLCs). Moreover, among 170 undergraduate students in the US, 'students' social presence was found as the only significant predictor of students' identification with their attended academic institutions' (Zhang et al., 2023:7), which was especially the case in

online synchronous learning. Indeed, students' identification and sense of belonging are important to online synchronous engagement. Online synchronous engagement can be defined according to five dimensions, which are 'communication, interaction, [social] presence, collaboration, and community' (Martin and Borup, 2022:1). This definition highlights the importance of belonging and community in HE, which is likely to affect online synchronous SGLCs, as well as whole class learning.

It can be difficult to understand others in online synchronous learning because of possible sound quality issues and that there is a lack of non-verbal communication and body language (Grondin et al., 2019), especially when cameras are off. Understanding other students is paramount, which can be difficult in person too. In an online synchronous environment, there are more challenges to understand others because of connectivity issues, which may render the sound unclear, that are rarely a student's or tutor's fault. If cameras are on, the view through small windows may be distorted (Grondin et al., 2019), and body language, such as hand gestures, can be out of the camera angle. Technical issues can therefore contribute to difficulties in understanding others.

To summarise this section, there can be online learning challenges for students related to their level of experience with it, access, lack of sense of community and social presence, engagement and connectivity quality. In the following subsections of this chapter relating to contextual online challenges for HE students, I focus on different student demographics to reflect those of the student participants who attended the clubs in my main study.

2.3.1. Challenges for international students

Many international students faced challenges, especially if newly arrived in the UK. Schartner (2023) maintains that it was generally challenging for international students to adapt to studying in the UK during the pandemic. Schartner's research (2023) is important in that it is acknowledged that where institutional staff have attempted to support international students on issues they were facing at the time, then most of these challenges were mitigated at least to some extent.

'Group comparisons showed that students who had been offered online social activities, guidance on adapting to remote learning, guidance on housing issues, and advice on how to deal with Covid-related discrimination adapted better than peers who had not been provided with these support measures (Schartner, 2023:1).'

Nevertheless, there is a need for universities to take a morally responsible approach to groups of transitioning students from their previous educational environment and institutions, through the university and to onward employment (Jones et al., 2023), which could avoid a 'deficit model' (Gilbert, 2015; Farenga, 2019, Jones et al., 2023). In other words, the HE institution, and all staff, need to recognise and take action to avoid discrimination and model this for their students. A supportive attitude needs to include international, minority ethnic and disadvantaged students. If students regardless of where they have come from can feel supported by university staff, this is likely to have a positive impact on students learning together in small groups within the classroom and outside (including online).

2.3.2. Challenges for Nursing students

Most nursing students faced considerable challenges and stress exacerbated by the pandemic. The demands of an intensive study programme and meeting the placement requirements of the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC, 2018) to acquire registered nurse status in the UK and to graduate were made more difficult because of Covid-19. Furthermore, many pre- registration nursing students in the UK were recruited to work in hospitals to combat the Covid-19 virus amid an unprecedented number of cases and staff shortages (Calica and Paterson, 2023). There were interruptions to study due to the financial need to be in other paid work and for those many nurses with family caring responsibilities, including mature students (Calica and Paterson, 2023) over the age of 21. Participants in Calicia and Paterson's (2023) study and my pilot study and collaborative article (Fromm et al., 2021) state problems of distractions for those students with children at home while studying.

This section has described some of the challenges most nursing students experienced during the pandemic in Britain. These challenges mean that nursing

students are likely to have needed support from each other and time to work in small groups, which may have been lacking in the online university environment.

2.3.3. Challenges for students previously educated outside the UK

It is important to reflect on the experiences of students educated in other countries with reference to the participants in this study, who were all Black and educated in Nigeria or Ghana, where English is the medium of instruction throughout education in these countries. This study was conducted at a time that many universities were obliged to adapt five-year plans as a result of the 'Closing the Gap' report (2019) published by Universities UK. The report found alarming awarding gaps between Black, Asian, Ethnic Minority and white students obliging universities to close the gaps. I am also committed to this aim in my general learning and teaching.

There is little research related to African students studying in the UK. One study, by Louise Owusu-Kwateng (2021), explains that personal experiences appeared to vary in a thematic analysis of twelve West African students at a university in London. Owusu-Kwateng (2021) describes these students' experiences as 'wahala' (meaning trouble in many West and Central African languages) in that some of the participants in the study experienced racism and discrimination with a lack of support from some lecturers and peers. For example, one student was quoted as being accused of plagiarism, when this was later found not to be the case, and another was of the opinion their tutors expected them to underachieve.

Some African students in Britain talked of loneliness and stress (Alloh et al., 2018; Owusu-Kwateng, 2021) and many Black students previously educated in the UK expressed the need for universities to understand them better. Important findings in the study by (Owusu-Kwateng, 2021:10) reveal that the participants' academic experiences were varied, 'Several were positive, whereas others, less so'. In other words, a significant number of student participants in Owusu-Kwateng's study experienced institutional racial discrimination.

In a collaborative phenomenological study of 20 Black students in England it is reported that many are reluctant to ask for support when needed, and hence also

experienced discrimination (Mimirinis et al., 2021). Owusu-Kwateng's (2021) and Mimirinis et al.'s (2021) studies call for an urgent review of how universities regard their Black students, that greater understanding of their needs and a more inclusive approach is required.

Adapting to learner centred models from teacher centred education was challenging for some participants in Owusu-Kwateng's (2021) article relating to Black students previously educated in West Africa, which implies there is likely to have been less emphasis on group work in classrooms in Africa than in the UK. Hence, the style of the delivery of HE education was probably different. This suggests a need for lecturers in England to be mindful of different teaching styles in other countries in their teaching and to communicate to students what is expected more clearly.

The research cited in this section conducted by Alloh et al. (2018), Owusu-Kwateng (2021) and Mimirinis et al. (2021) is of major significance because according to the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC, 2023), 30.1% of new entrants to the NHS in the six months to 31 March 2023 state their ethnicity as 'Black'. This is the time when the Black African nursing students, who participated in the clubs, would have graduated and are most likely to have found employment in the NHS, the major healthcare employer in the UK. In other words, Black nursing students are a sizeable percentage in the nursing profession in the UK, which renders research about Black Nursing students studying in the UK important. My personal stance is that university members, both tutors and other staff, as well as students, should regard this large and important minority with respect, compassion and understanding, and that more research is required about the experiences of Black students in the UK.

I may be subconsciously biased because I am White British and European. Papadopoulos (2017) explains that it is essential to take an inclusive and compassionate approach to diversity as well as an active interest in it, which must include intercultural conversation in education. This is important to my study about Active Empathic Listening skills. One of my personal aims is to encourage development of these skills among diverse groups of students so they can understand each other better to be able to support and work together in small

group learning conversations. Finally given the dearth of literature about Black students, and Black Nursing students in the UK, further research about Black students and Black student nurses studying in the UK is paramount.

2.3.4. Challenges for older university students and postgraduates

Before the pandemic, adapting to the demands of HE was challenging for many older nursing students, for example in Australia, where juggling studying and looking after children, the perception of taking longer to catch up with technology and financial strain made it difficult to study (Christensen and Martin, 2021). These difficulties were likely to have been exacerbated during the pandemic and are likely to have been similar in the UK, and other countries too, for older students who had to work from home with children around.

Findings from a postgraduate study reveal that postgraduate research (PGR) students studying in Wales during the pandemic experienced moderate depression, anxiety and loneliness but low levels of stress with negligible differences between gender and course type reported (King, 2022). Findings in King's study are significant because they reveal that the impact on mental health experienced by most of these students caused a decrease in motivation and productivity in their PGR studies.

The literature in this section provides an explanation of the need for understanding some of challenges faced by older and postgraduate students before and during the pandemic.

2.3.5. Challenges for shy and monopolising students

Personal factors, such as shy and monopolising tendencies in small group learning conversations (SGLC) should be acknowledged and understood in a cultural context (as mentioned in my introduction). For example, shyness can be perceived as a mark of respect in some societies, such as in Japan (Machi, 2018) and considered as polite home culture 'etiquette' in Malaysian and other Asian classrooms (Arunasalam and Burton, 2018). Moreover, Adenike Akinbode (2015) explains that this perception is different in the UK and US where shy learners may be frowned upon. In other words, shy students are sometimes viewed negatively

by teachers. However, Akinbode (2015) suggest that shy students may be very attentive and reflexive towards their learning, as well as good listeners. Furthermore, it can be difficult for the shy student who might require more time to first think before speaking and thus some space to then be listened to (Akinbode, 2015).

Furthermore, Marion Heron (2019) acknowledges an important suggestion in Remedios et al. (2008, cited in Heron, 2019), which points out that speaking in seminars can be stressful for many students in the UK regardless of linguistic background. In HE, Heron (2019) maintains consideration should include previous educational background too, because many students may not be familiar with seminar style learning and teaching.

Regarding monopolising students, Duhigg's (2016) report in the *New York Times Magazine* is important here. It is about an academically successful Harvard graduate named Julia Rosovsky who found herself being talked over in a study group and tells of how she later researched the characteristics of individuals and teams in the workplace and some of the problems of monopolisers in groups. Duhigg's article calls for the need to listen to others when working in teams. Similarly, Nancy Kline's book (1999), in Business Psychology, emphasises the importance of attentive listening to others. Attentive listening to others is one of the key aspects relating to the concept of Active Empathic Listening described in Chapter 3, hence important to my study.

In addition, in Compassionate Pedagogy in HE, in which distress in others is noticed and acted on the 'soothing system' in the brain can be underdeveloped in monopolising types of students (Gilbert, 2015; Gilbert, 2016) because, according to the Compassionate Mind Foundation website, compassion is a psychobiological motivation rather than an emotion (Jayasundara et al., 2023). In other words, monopolising students may also experience stress. This suggests that compassion, as well as attentive listening, seem important in SGLCs for both shy and monopolising types of students. Attentive listening to others is one of the key aspects of Active Empathic Listening in my study. Hence, I include shy and monopolising students related to my focus on developing Active Empathic Listening skills in more depth in the following chapters.

2.4. Challenges for the tutor researcher

Many university lecturers required new skills and confidence to facilitate online teaching quickly necessitated by the pandemic (Bancroft et al., 2021). I had never taught online before the pandemic. In addition, I faced the consequences of not having any teaching, being temporarily out of work, when the pandemic started in March 2020. This meant I lost access to that university (as a tutor), potential students and participants for my study for six months. Subsequently, through volunteering to teach online, I later managed to set up, plan, facilitate and begin to research groups of students in three university schools (with one or two groups of students in each school) in an online synchronous environment. It was useful to practise on two platforms, namely MS Teams and Zoom across the three schools for my pilot study. I decided that Zoom was more user friendly for facilitating breakout rooms at the time, which was important in an academic conversation club.

2.5. Reflections - Challenges for students and the tutor researcher

In this chapter, I have considered some contextual challenges. This is important to my reflections related to the groups of students I was to teach in the clubs and how I hoped to understand them. My attempt to understand some of the challenges certain demographics of students faced during and in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns influenced how I planned and the taught in the clubs, and my reflections on the teaching later. In addition, my attempt to understand the participating students in the sample contributed to my reflexivity in my research. In this chapter, I have tried to consider students who may be similar. Nevertheless, I recognise that they cannot be representative of the student participants in my study in that there would be a large variation in individual lived experience. In addition, my own experiences of being a PGR student, as well as my role as tutor researcher, during and in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns have shaped my understanding of some possible students' challenges. Nevertheless, my study is not without subconscious bias.

2.6. Summary

This chapter provides a background about the pandemic and online teaching. The chapter also considers international students, students previously educated outside the UK, Black students, older students, shy and monopolising students, as well as pre-registration nursing students who are represented in the sample in my study. It also considers some of my own conceptual challenges as a tutor. The pandemic era is characterised by isolation and resulting mental health issues for many. When teaching moved online, difficulties with connectivity, unknown technology and problems accessing learning were reported, which are likely to have been challenging for many students, including international and nursing students. Black students are examples of those who are often disadvantaged and discriminated against in HE in the UK. In addition, the pandemic and the rapid transition to online learning has been challenging for many lecturers including myself. My next chapter is a literature review of Active Empathic Listening.

3. Active Empathic Listening – Literature Review

## 3.1.	Outline

This chapter discusses the literature on Active Empathic Listening (AEL), which starts with some definitions and original work arising from Psychotherapy and Business Psychology. The chapter then compares and explores AEL within the HE perspective, including online synchronous learning and teaching. I have found little research in AEL in Higher Education.

## 3.2.	Active Empathic Listening - Definitions

Active Empathic Listening has also been referred to as Empathic Listening (Reich et al., 2022) and both these terms appear to have the same or similar meaning. To complicate matters, the term Active Listening appears to overlap or have a slight difference compared with Active Empathic Listening. Graham Bodie, Professor of Integrated Marketing Communication at the University of Mississippi uses both Active Empathic Listening and Active Listening in his work (Bodie, 2011a; Bodie,2011b; Bodie, 2013; Bodie et al., 2015; Bodie et al., 2016).

> 'Specifically, active-empathic listening (AEL) is proposed as the active and emotional involvement of a listener during a given interaction - an involvement that is conscious on the part of the listener but is also perceived by the speaker' (Bodie, 2011a:278).

What is key in the above quote is that there is a clear relationship between the listener and speaker. Indeed, Bodie (2011b) states that Active Empathic Listening is 'highly salient to close relationships'. Here, Bodie (2011b) explains that the listener is both actively and emotionally involved in the conversation with the initial speaker, which should allow the listener to sense how well what the speaker is trying to convey is understood during the process of the communication. The active and emotional connection is likely to prove significant to belonging, community and relationships between a pair of students or between members of a small group learning conversation (SGLC). Bodie's research in Active Empathic Listening (AEL), which Bodie sometimes calls Active Listening in his subsequent work that relates back to this study nevertheless emphasises the interpersonal nature of listening (Bodie, 2011b; Bodie, 2013; Bodie et al., 2015; Bodie et al.,

2016). Bodie's work is conducted among undergraduate students in the field of communication studies (Bodie, 2011b; Bodie, 2013; Bodie et al., 2015; Bodie et al., 2016) and contextualised in the field of Communication Psychology in general and in person, which differs from my focus on AEL skills in small group learning conversations in online synchronous learning in HE.

However, compared with Active Empathic Listening, the concept of Active Listening, according to Bodie (2011b) emphasises the *active* nature of listening to others, which is derived from Carl Rogers and associates original work from Psychotherapy and Business Psychology (Rogers, 1951; Rogers and Farson 1957/1987). Nevertheless, in both Active Empathic Listening and Active Listening the activity can create a sense of empathy, as well as warmth, on the part of a listener in a conversation, which is explained in a chapter by Thomas Gordon in Roger's edited book (1951). In that chapter, Thomas Gordon acknowledges the importance of empathy and warmth in his explanation of Active Listening. Hence, here the meaning of AEL and AL appears to be the same. Gordon's chapter is of great interest to me because I can see a close connection with learning, which I review in the next paragraph.

Gordon (1951) explains the role of conveying empathy and warmth in client centred Psychotherapy in a group. The idea, Gordon explains, is to create a 'nonthreatening accepting atmosphere' between members of the group. This I can relate to and is an important point when attempting to create an atmosphere in which group members feel at ease with each other within a learning conversation, or in any conversation between friends. Indeed, in classrooms, Marion Heron and associates, in the context of Foundation Year students and in HE, advise that creating an open environment reduces the anxiety of making mistakes (Heron et al., 2023b). This is significant because in an open environment students are likely to feel free to talk and participate actively in class or in online synchronous communication, as well as make friends, which are conducive to learning and sharing ideas.

Gordon (1951) explains that by prefixing certain phrases before orally paraphrasing or summarising what was said, then the speaker's meaning or intention of what that speaker means may be clarified by the listener. To me this

is very important in the context of SGLCs because without clarification then there is a possibility that a speaker can be misunderstood or the content, and possibly context, of what that speaker is talking about could be misinterpreted. Examples of such prefixed phrases that Gordon (1951) provides are:

'You are saying …'
'I gather that you mean …'
'If I understand you correctly …'

Such prefixed phrases are also referred to as 'sentence stems' (Heron et al., 2023b). Teaching this kind of language, known as 'functional phrases' in linguistics and language teaching, is familiar to me through my long experience of teaching English to speakers whose first language is not English in diverse contexts and several countries. This experience includes my later role, since several years, as a university Academic Skills tutor in England. Functional phrases relate to a few words that convey clarification, suggestions and other functions in languages, which in my experience of both learning and teaching foreign languages are quite kHeron, et al. (2023b:460) recommend that 'teachers explicitly teach appropriate language to achieve talk moves such as challenging, checking and reasoning'. These phrases are essential to prevent misunderstandings, as well as for creating a warm empathetic atmosphere in the group.

I have included very similar phrases to those above in my teaching and materials for the online academic conversation clubs (see Chapter 4 - Developing Online Academic Conversation Clubs). However, using these phrases can go further than clarifying the intended meaning of a speaker and help the initial speaker to feel understood on an emotional and psychosocial level from the warmth or empathy conveyed by a listener using such phrases. In other words, warmth and empathy may be reciprocal for both speakers and listeners. Here, Gordon maintains that active listening is a group-centred approach, which may encourage participation by group members in a 'non-threatening' atmosphere.

A group-centred approach is important because it is likely to result in group members to be valued. Indeed, AEL might provide reassurance in that it can help

what has been said to be 'validated', which means 'finding the truth in what we think' (Leahy, 2005:195). This may lead to a person sensing that they are valued by others, which is paramount considering Owusu-Kwateng's article (2021) regarding reluctance to seek advice by Black students at a university in England. If a student feels they are valued it could help them to feel more confident to ask for support, which Owusu-Kwateng (2021) and Mimirinis (2021) maintain was lacking regarding Black students at the HE institutions in England in their studies. Confidence to ask for support may extend to SGLCs if the general environment of the university provides a more inclusive sense of belonging. This is significant because it suggests that there is a potential connection between AEL and feeling welcomed and valued within the wider university and small learning groups.

Rogers and Farson (1957/1987) assert that Active Listening is 'active' because it requires the listener to take responsibility to cooperate with the speaker. They also state the importance of 'listening for total meaning', which implies the content and attitude behind the meaning. Listening for total meaning can be considered in an educational context because it can involve learning from each other's points mentioned and discussed in a small group learning conversation. Nevertheless, Rogers and Farson's (1957/1987) definition of AL is from the field of Business Psychology and does not appear to extend to the social aspect of listening to another person or members of a small group as much as in Bodie's (2011b) definition of AEL. However, Gordon's work should be acknowledged in that the warmth and empathy conveyed in a conversation where members participate are important to the listening activity. I have noticed that in Gordon's (1951) chapter a key section heading is entitled 'Attending to others'. This is indicative of the psychosocial aspect of AEL, despite the term Active Empathic Listening not being employed. I have therefore chosen to use the term Active Empathic Listening because of the social relationships emphasised in Bodie's article (2011b) and Gordon's chapter (1951), which is important in the context of small group learning conversations in the clubs.

I have given some consideration to the word 'empathic' within Active Empathic Listening in terms of the social and relational aspects of AEL. For example, in nursing, which is important regarding my participants' field of study, empathy is the attempt to 'achieve a close communication with another person and a fuller

understanding of them as an individual' (Petty et al., 2020:3). Bletscher and Lee (2021:162) also highlight the social and relational aspect of empathy in AEL in their research conducted among university students in the US. According to Bletscher and Lee (2021:162), Active Empathic Listening is:

> '…a cornerstone of building strong interpersonal relationships by understanding and respecting the other(s) involved…',

Respecting others is paramount to learning in a small group because respect is so important, especially in consideration of international students in HE institutions in the UK, which is the second largest recruiter of international students in the world after the US (Jones et al., 2023). For example, respect within educational institutions is of high social and cultural significance in Iran (Mohammadian, 2013), Thailand (Pattapong, 2010), China, Japan, (Akinbode, 2015) and Malaysia (Arunasalam, 2016). HE students from China and Japan tend to be quiet out of respect for others, which can be viewed negatively in the UK and US, yet they may be very thoughtful (Akinbode, 2015). Indeed, Rogers (1951) maintains that the process of Active Listening involves 'unconditional positive regard' towards others.

To summarise this section, Active Empathic Listening can convey warmth and empathy that refers to the psychosocial nature of listening and relationships, whereas Active Listening may refer more exactly to the activity of listening for the meaning of what has been communicated by a speaker and the action of doing that. Nevertheless, both Active Empathic Listening and Active Listening are often used interchangeably and are both important to fully capture what is said in a conversation, which is important in HE learning. In the context of my study, I prefer the term Active Empathic Listening because of the emphasis on interpersonal relationships. Therefore, my study is about Active Empathic Listening, which I explain in the context of online synchronous learning as this chapter develops.

3.2.1. Towards an Active Empathic Listening Model

In the context of in person learning, which I distinguish as AEL in the online synchronous learning context in my study, Weger et al. (2014:14) propose a model of Active Listening (AL) in their article and state that it involves three types of listening, which are firstly; non-verbal responses or non-verbal communication, such as head nods and eye contact; secondly paraphrasing a message orally and thirdly; asking questions to allow for elaboration of what was said. Weger et al.'s (2014) quantitative findings conducted among 115 undergraduates studying communication skills in the US are interesting in that they reveal that participants felt more understood and socially connected to others in their conversations after four hours of AL skills tuition than in those conversations where there had been no AL skills instruction (details of how students were instructed are not provided in Weger et al.'s article). Student participants were asked to talk about topics such as their weekend activities (Weger et al., 2014), which indicates that the conversations were very general in nature and not academic or related to very emotive personal issues either. Nevertheless, based on the Weger et al. (2014) AL model of non-verbal communication, Oral Paraphrasing and Asking Open Questions, Kuhn et al. (2018) conclude that in couple counselling relationships were strengthened through dyadic 'attentive listening', with a counsellor, which they also refer to as AL. Hence, it appears that the Weger et al. (2014) model can be helpful in conversations of a personal nature in which couples talk about difficulties with relationships.

F2F conversations in HE

Active Listening

Non-verbal Communication (NVC)

Oral Paraphrasing (OP)

AL

Asking Open Questions (OQs)

Adapted from Weger et al. (2014)
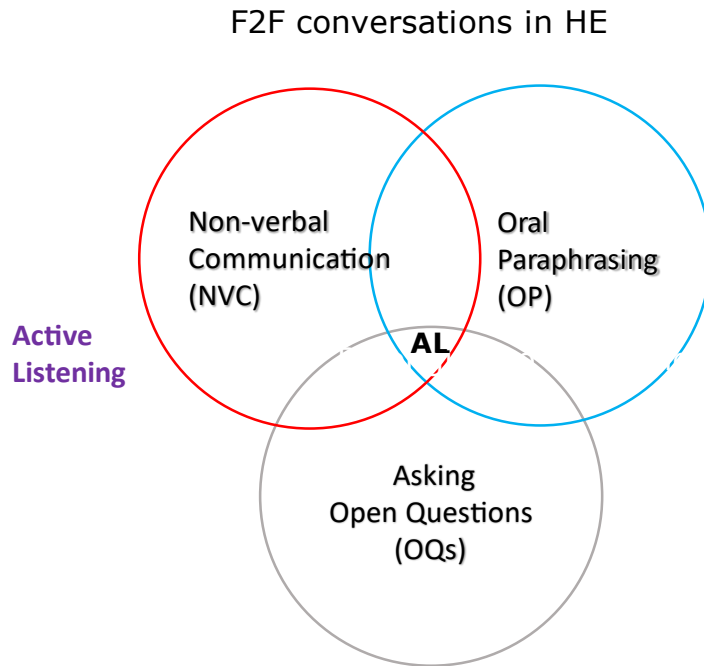
Figure 3-1 Model of AL in F2F conversations in HE adapted from Weger et al. (2014)

The following three sub-sections of my chapter explain each element in more detail of the Weger et al. (2014) model in the diagram above, which are non-verbal communication, Oral Paraphrasing and Asking Open Questions.

3.2.2. Non-verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication means paying attention to eye contact, facial expression, body language, interpersonal space, touch, as well as tone of voice (Hall et al., 2019). According to the American Psychologist, Daniel Goleman, (2020) non-verbal communication (NVC) may represent 90% of emotional communication. Lapakko (1997), an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies in the US, doubts that this figure is the case and proposes that language can convey meaning more accurately in his essay. This may be true in a learning conversation where it is important to convey information and opinions, as well as emotions. Nevertheless, according to Jayasundara et al. (2023) NVC should not be ignored in online synchronous learning. Here, findings in relation to 24 students in small group conversations of four students per group in Sri Lanka, Jayasundara et al. (2023) explain that in online learning when cameras were on, it was possible for teachers to understand students' NVCs through the use of compassionate

skills, such as eye gaze and nodding. Compassionate-focused skills in HE can alleviate distress between group members, including those group members who are from different cultural backgrounds within the groups studied (Gilbert, 2015; 2016; 2018). These compassionate skills require cognitive psychobiological motivation on the part of the student (Jayasundara et al., 2023). This implies that much can be understood of non-verbal communication even in online synchronous learning. Furthermore, non-verbal communication using compassionate skills is important in terms of intercultural communication, which Jaysundara (2023) has found. Yet it is not clear whether students could specify the extent and depth of their non-verbal understanding. In other words, further verbal explanations were required for detailed understanding in Jayasundara's (2023) study. According to my understanding of Jayansundara's (2023) research, NVC was helpful initially but further oral communication was subsequently required. Oral Paraphrasing and Asking Open Questions within Weger's (2014) model refer to the verbal dimension of Active Empathic Listening that I explain in the next two sub-sections.

3.2.3. Oral Paraphrasing

OP has been defined in different learning contexts. In language learning and translation studies, Oral Paraphrasing (OP) can be used to rephrase, summarise or clarify previous statements that can show how far what has been said has been understood, both literally and metaphorically (Zhang and Yamamoto, 2005). Moreover, Oral Paraphrasing can be useful for showing whether the initial speaker has been understood. Rephrasing, using vocabulary of a similar meaning, or reformulating the grammar of the original message may be helpful to meaningful language learning for a second language speaker, although not easy. Rephrasing and reformulating may give a student who might usually be shy or silent the opportunity to speak without directly admitting that they haven't understood. This relates to my small-scale research project towards my EdD (Fromm, 2019), mentioned here in my introduction. In my small-scale project, some international students at a university in England, who had just completed and received their Pre-Sessional English results, stated that they were shy to speak for fear of saying something wrong that could be to do with the content of what was said or anxiety about making language errors.

Rephrasing can also be useful to clarify something complex or important that has been said. For example, in my Reflective Journal on 18.10.2019 I noted the following in a conversation with a nurse. I had said, 'I think we should do something about this problem before it spirals' to which the nurse replied, 'Yes, you mean, before it escalates'. Rephrasing is useful in a learning conversation to clarify understanding and for a learner to make a contribution to a conversation when the learner is unsure of how well what has been said has been understood, as well as a way of agreeing and supporting another learner. Reformulating the grammar of a sentence is another way of repeating or clarifying what has been said. For example, 'the author states the importance of oral paraphrasing' can be reformulated, 'paraphrasing orally is important, as the author states'.

In the context of foreign language learning, Ngan (2018) states that OP may help HE students in Vietnam studying English to participate more in class by restructuring or providing synonyms of some of the words of what was said relating to a short text they had read. When these students were asked to reflect on their Oral Paraphrasing ability, 78% of the sample were able to paraphrase what was said and express the intended meaning. What is interesting is that Ngan (2018) cites and discusses Kirkland and Saunders's article (1991), relating to teaching foreign languages to children, explaining that OP provides a reason to participate, keep practising the language and learn from each other. Ngan concludes that OP can benefit the process of language learning, clarify meaning and provide opportunities for students to participate actively in small group learning conversations.

In a discussion article, Rester (2012) describes a Communication Studies classroom activity, in which UG students were asked to consider a list of ten different listening habits related to a scenario provided about a hypothetical student suffering from anxiety, which was then followed by a role play activity. These techniques included interrupting, judging and inattention. Here, OP was favoured to be an especially effective communication technique because being able to communicate back was believed to help others experiencing difficulties with their studies (Rester, 2012). The article emphasises the supportive nature of OP in HE SGLCs. Similarly, Bodie et al.'s quantitative study (2016) concludes that OP can enable speakers to experience supportive conversations, which can benefit

group cohesion for university students. It is significant that the supportive nature of OP discussed in Bodie's article (2016) appears to be in line with Weger et al.'s model (2014), Gordon's (1951) and Roger's and Farson's (1957) work in that employing OP in a conversation can benefit group relationships. Therefore, it is likely that facilitating OP skills in HE learning with prospective participating students in my study would generate warmth and empathy between members of an SGLC and hence be a skill that may support good relationships between students practising OP.

Kline (1999) confirms that in the context of business and general communication psychology, thinking and expressing thoughts takes time. Nevertheless a 'Thinking Environment' may help group members take time to think before speaking.

In general conversations between friends in Japan, where respect is important in society as mentioned in the previous section, OP appears to be used in conversations between friends that can support relationships (Machi, 2018). According to Saeko Machi's article, paraphrasing other's speech can occur when sharing new or previously shared information. If the information is new, then it appears that understanding is tested, and partners are supported to clarify what has been said. As Machi (2018), an Associate Professor of Languages in Tokyo, states, sharing information through OP can show attention to other speakers and the content of what they have said. If the information is familiar to the speakers, OP then serves to reinforce what has been said. Both types demonstrate collaborative conversations. Hence, OP may positively affect relationships creating better mutual understanding between friends (Machi, 2018). Further, research in understanding OP in friendship groups is needed. Machi's work is interesting but limited to a few conversations from an unscripted television talk show. In addition, consideration of OP in SGLCs within HE in and across diverse cultures is important to consider.

In the workplace, OP can help clarify misunderstanding among colleagues, especially where specific information needs to be conveyed, such as in an engineering project (Whitcomb and Whitcomb, 2013). Here too, OP can be beneficial to mutual understanding between members of a group and provide

reassurance in conversations (Whitcomb and Whitcomb, 2013; Bodie et al., 2015). Once understanding has been checked using OP phrases, and group members feel reassured that they have been listened to and understood, then the conversation may be elaborated on by Asking Open Questions. This is important in learning from others and sharing ideas in the HE context, which may enhance critical thinking, which I discuss in the next sub-section.

3.2.4. Asking Open Questions

Within the AEL paradigm, Asking Open Questions (OQs) can encourage a speaker to elaborate their thoughts and feelings on what was said (Weger et al., 2014; Kuhn et al., 2018; Kannampallil and Abraham 2020), which would be useful in many contexts including SGLCs. An example of an OQ in the context of helping relationships in couples counselling is: 'How did you experience the situation?' (Kuhn, et al., 2018). Weger et al. (2014:13) discuss their findings in a controlled communications lab stating, 'message paraphrasing and encouraging speaker elaboration should communicate understanding and interest'. However, further explanation of how Asking OQs specifically relates to encouraging effective relationships is not provided here.

Asking OQs is important in nursing communication, for example in cancer care to elicit a story from patients who may be anxious following diagnosis (Kruijver et al., 2001). This is likely to show empathy and attention important for mental wellbeing. In addition, **according to** Kannampallil and Abraham (2020:92) in the context of nursing handovers to other nurses, 'findings highlight the role of listening behaviours as a driver for more questions'. This is likely to be helpful for nurses and student nurses on placement to learn and reflect more deeply about the specific condition of a patient and importantly avoid errors though possible misunderstanding. Likewise, Asking Open Questions is likely to allow critical thinking and reflection in SGLCs. Asking OQs can enhance critical thinking in HE (Hardman, 2016) and be beneficial for interpersonal relationships and mental wellbeing of those being listened to. Finally, the reviewed literature in this section indicates that NVC, OP and Asking OQs are likely to be beneficial to students in SGLCs.

3.3. Active Empathic Listening in Learning and Teaching

There is very little research on AEL or AL in learning and teaching. Even in medical education, where training in effective communication with patients is important, there is a dearth of literature on AEL or aspects of it.

> '… In fact, the leading textbook in this area, *Teaching and Learning Communication Skills in Medicine* (Kurtz, Silverman, & Draper, 2005) does not index the words "active listening" or even "listening"' (Meldrum and Apple, 2019: no page).

Graham Bodie and associates have been major contributors to the study of AEL both as a theory and with respect to findings from samples of undergraduate communication students in the US, for example Bodie (2011b); Bodie et al., (2015) and Bodie, et al. (2016). Although this body of work claims that AEL is an effective communication skill, it does not explicitly mention AEL in the context of being beneficial to learning, in any field, or relationships specifically in small group learning conversations. For example, communication students were asked to talk about two distressing events with a researcher recording the conversations (Bodie et al., 2014), which is relevant so far as it proves that AEL may reassure a stressed person, but it does not consider AEL as a learning skill that can require development. In other words, Bodie et al.'s (2014) article concludes that AEL may be beneficial to conversations of an interpersonal nature when a person has a problem but they do not reveal any educational value regarding AEL skills.

In the absence of substantive literature of AEL specific to education, social constructivist learning theory may provide a background to the concept of interpersonal communication (Keaton and Bodie, 2011) and AEL. Historically, social constructivist learning theory is derived from the principles of Vygotsky's (1978/38), Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). ZPD maintains that there is a difference ~~of~~ between being able to solve a problem alone or needing someone more capable to guide or collaborate in the process to solve it. Initially, as a child's speech develops, they use language to communicate with those around, so the child becomes able to use that language to organise their own thoughts and communicate. Vygotsky's hypothesis explains that guided or collaborative learning is both social and developmental.

In AEL, through the social engagement of iterative listening and speaking, learners may be able to move towards understanding in stages and subsequently organise their thoughts to learn something new. Following Vygotsky, subsequent work in the social constructivist view of learning from language teaching, includes scaffolding and dialogic pedagogy, which may be compared to AEL. A definition of scaffolding is 'a temporary support system' that may help an individual in a pair or small group situation perform better than without this support (Granott, 2005:144). For example, according to Kobayashi (1994), among second language students of various abilities in the target language, the higher-level student is more likely to fill a gap in vocabulary and/or grammatical knowledge or aid memory. Here, the communication involves listening attentively and paraphrasing orally to check understanding. Kobayashi (1994) maintains that listening and paraphrasing is communicative and aids conversation. Therefore, both AEL skills and scaffolding may be similar in that they are supportive. These could boost confidence in learning conversations to encourage active participation.

In initial communication training for undergraduates, findings by Weger et al. (2014) reveal that Active Listening benefits understanding of both meaning and feelings. Furthermore, Bodie et al. (2015) maintain those conversations incorporating more attentive listening flow better. In other words, the closer a student actively listens, such as by paraphrasing (as mentioned in the last section) and by scaffolding, for example adding expressions that may be missing in a person's vocabulary, the closer the members in a SGLC are likely to understand each other. Through attentive active listening, another student may notice and hence supply the missing words, where necessary.

Developed by Mercer and Littleton (2007), the social constructivist view of dialogic teaching originated from Vygotsky's work. Mercer and Littleton (2007) state that it is in the co-construction of knowledge that learning can be activated by both the learner and the teacher through collaborative talk from which the idea of dialogic learning evolved (Frank Hardman and Abd-Kadir, 2010). Jan Hardman (2016) explains that in dialogic pedagogy with a focus on tutor to student interactions, that it is through open questioning, probing for clarification, elaborating and asking further questions that higher level critical thinking may be achieved. Furthermore, mutually created understanding, known as

Communication Interactional Competence (Walsh, 2006), may shape student contributions, which can actively involve and engage students in the interaction (Walsh, 2012). In Communication Interactional Competence it is suggested that asking wh- questions, such as when, where and especially why, can help elaborate conversations to actively engage students in learning conversations including in OSL (Moorhouse et al., 2023). It is possible that Asking Open Questions could be beneficial to student engagement in SGLCs by inviting others to speak and thus be a step to creating Communication Interactional Competence.

(Paragraph related to Heron's work moved to next section in relation to OSL.)

Cognitive and affective processes in classroom interaction are essential learning concepts (Brien et al., 2008; D'Souza et al., 2014; Alexander, 2020). In classroom interaction it is through dialogue that students can exchange ideas and learn from each other. Robin Alexander, a British educationalist (2020:128) defines dialogue as 'the oral exchange and deliberative handling of information, ideas and opinions'. In his book, Alexander (2020) explains that dialogic classroom talk, which in practice in the classroom is cognitive and involves the mental processes associated with speech, thinking and learning. Alexander (2020) also states that dialogic classroom talk can be considered as affective social aspects of learning and development within a Vygotskian interactive pedagogical approach. Therefore, a dialogic approach is important to both cognitive and affective dimensions. Alexander's definition is situated in the context of children's education and refers to talk or the interaction between the teacher and the children or between children. Alexander's (2020) dialogic classroom talk is based on six principles, which I have explained in the following table:

Principles	My explanation of Alexander's Dialogic Principles
Collective	Joint learning of classroom tasks as whole class or in groups
Supportive	Learners feel free to express themselves and help each other
Reciprocal	Listening, sharing ideas and asking questions
Deliberative	Learners attempt to find solutions
Cumulative	Learners expand on what they have learnt
Purposeful	Learners have an aim

Table 3-1 Adaptation of Alexander's six principles of dialogic classroom talk (2020:131)

In relation to Table 3-1 above, the collective principle refers to learning in a group related to a specific task. The supportive principle may be similar to or differ from AEL skills in that this support may show empathy between students. However, empathy is not mentioned in Alexander's principles. In my study, the reciprocal principle: listening, sharing ideas and asking questions, can be applied to a small group learning conversation in HE. This is important to AEL skills too, which I consider in the discussion chapter in relation to my findings and how or where these might relate to AEL skills or differ. Students may try to find solutions and have an aim. However, in education the learning process and cumulative expansion on what is being learnt is usually more important that finding the solution or providing correct answers. Indeed, Alexander (2020) considers the process or progress of enacting dialogue, and that the product is about experiencing various avenues, such as making sense of learning. These processes can be cognitive; for example, 'talk for thinking' and 'talk for communicating' and affective; for instance in relation to the supportive principle (Alexander, 2020) mentioned above.

In the context of HE nursing, the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning are significant according to findings in Canada (Brien et al., 2008) and Oman (D'Souza et al., 2014). Brien et al. (2008) reveal differences in affective learning from the perspectives of students and tutors within in-person palliative nursing education in Canada in a quantitative and qualitative study. In Brien et al.'s (2008) findings, the students were positive about their affective and reflective learning, whereas the tutors reported some lack of participation, which appears to be introspective. Brien et al. (2008) explain that affective learning combines critical thinking and self-questioning. Moreover, it appears the students in Brien et al.'s (2008) discussion may have found communicating their critical thinking and learning challenging because of being confronted by their emotions, values and beliefs. The article does not reveal whether the students communicated, supported or empathised with each other or the tutors. In my study, I consider whether facilitating Active Empathic Listening skills through OP and non-verbal communication would be helpful towards affective engagement because of its supportive empathic nature.

Research based on a questionnaire circulated among 250 nursing students in Oman is interesting in that findings state positive relationships were established in study groups in which students work together to make sense of complex concepts (D' Souza et al., 2014). In addition, cognitive learning among student nurses appears to have been achieved through solving problems and thinking critically together as discussed D' Souza et al.'s (2014) article. Indeed, working together can lead to affective engagement whether in person or online (Martin and Borup, 2022), which can be significant to peer relationships. The combination of cognitive and affective learning processes is noteworthy in D'Souza et al.'s (2014) study. Both cognitive and affective dimensions are important in classroom learning in different contexts. I consider the literature of the cognitive and affective dimensions in relation to online synchronous learning in the next section.

AEL skills can be beneficial to students in SGLCs. Bletscher and Lee's (2021) article about the impact of AEL on an undergraduate communication course is significant because they explain that AEL can enhance students' communication skills in

group work and team performance inside and outside class. They also reinforce the idea that AEL enhances affective interpersonal relationships between students and demonstrates care to others. AEL involves verbal and non-verbal communication by showing, interpreting and reflecting on what a speaker has communicated non-judgementally (Bletscher and Lee, 2021; Bodie et al., 2013). A judgemental comment or remark can be experienced negatively. For example, if another student has a different opinion and does not listen to or acknowledge differences this could lead to misunderstandings, which in turn may affect the relationships between those students.

Non-judgemental contributions to learning conversations are especially important considering students' ethnicities. This is because unconscious bias, prejudice, cultural misconceptions, and racism is evident in educational environments, which can undermine confidence and be detrimental to learning as well (Clark et al., 2022). Students need to listen with attention to others and acknowledge what was said, by paraphrasing that can include non-verbal communication such as smiling and nodding. This may result in the listener or the speaker changing their opinion in relation to what was said. If one group member is then still found to be wrong then at least that person has been listened to and respected, possibly with the acknowledgement that there was a difference of opinion. Thus, AEL skills should afford the possibility for students to listen with attention, paraphrase what has been said and ask OQs, which may allow for open discussions and different opinions to be shared non-judgementally. This means students should be open and respective of others' opinions and ideas but at the same time feel that they too are in an environment where they can share their own.

A 'psychologically safe space' (Holley and Steiner, 2005; Barton, 2018; Brewster, 2019; Heron, 2023) is key, whether in the classroom or online. It refers to an environment in which students feel at ease to have the confidence to talk. According to Karen Gravett, the learning environment matters to students (Gravett, 2023) so students feel part of the university community and accepted (Jones et al., 2023).

Research in the UK in the early 2020s reveals that good relationships are essential to communication in HE (Bovill, 2020) and are important to the learning

environment too (Gravett and Winstone, 2022; Gravett, 2023). In addition, OP has been found to benefit secondary students in mainstreamed classrooms who have some language and learning difficulties, who might be 'inhibited by the stigma of admitting their confusion in front of classmates' (Donahue and Pidek, 1993:35). Therefore, it is possible that, within the AEL skills model, OP may help build confidence among learners who might be reluctant, anxious or shy and/or have other inhibitions to speak in class.

Considering shyness, Akinbode (2015) explains that it is important for teachers to acknowledge different personality traits and cultures. She explains that shyness may be perceived as a positive or negative attribute. Students in societies where speaking in class pair and group work is less common, such as in Malaysia and China, may be deemed to be shy in US and UK cultures, but nevertheless be willing to learn (Pattapong, 2010; Liu and Jackson, 2008; Macintyre, 2007). In an unpublished study related to a questionnaire of closed and open questions (and EdD formative project), which I circulated among 36 Chinese Pre-Sessional English (PSE) students at a UK university in 2019, student participants stated they were 'shy' or 'anxious' in class when asked to give their opinion. Several participants explained that this is to avoid feeling embarrassed in case what they wanted to say might be wrong, as well as fear about making errors in English, a foreign language. Moreover, in my experience of teaching Chinese PSE students for many years, AEL skills appear to help students speak more in SGLCs when asked to discuss academic texts together. This is despite some of them appearing to be shy initially that relates to challenges in SGLCs for shy students that I mentioned in the previous chapter. AEL skills can also help students pay attention when they listen to what is said and, as Gordon (1951) maintains, 'attend to' their peers.

Through attending to peers, which means Listening with Attention (Gordon 1951), it may then be possible to orally paraphrase back or repeat what was said for understanding, explaining and validating what was said. In other words, without listening attentively, it is not possible to adequately paraphrase and without paraphrasing orally, a speaker in a group may not know how far what they have said has been acknowledged. Asking Open Questions can extend the conversation further to add to what is being leant by members of a SGLC. Doing this may also

increase participation and engagement in both face-to-face and online synchronous learning conversations.

To summarise this section, AEL skills can be compared with Communication Interaction Competence that are both important to cognitive and affective learning processes in SGLCs. AEL skills involve the activities of Listening with Attention, Oral Paraphrasing and Asking Open Questions, which when received can convey warmth and empathy, which hence can enhance the affective dimension of learning and relationships in SGLCs. AEL skills may be helpful for shy students learning in or across different cultures.

3.4.   Active Empathic Listening in Online Learning and Teaching

It is important to address AEL in the context of online learning and teaching, despite its origins in group psychotherapy. Historically, Guenther (2022:203) notes that it was through new recording technology in the 1940s in group psychotherapy where Carl Rogers was able to listen to himself in conversations with his students to then 'speak less and listen more, a change that he [Rogers] thought would aid their patients'. This is an interesting point in that Rogers was able to relate to his own listening which leads me to think about whether other technology, such as online learning platforms can benefit AEL. Nevertheless, one difficulty I have found relating to AEL literature (and relating skills - NVC, OP, Asking and OQs) in the context of online synchronous SGLCs is that there is sparse literature about AEL in online synchronous learning. A (revised) literature search in March 2024 revealed four articles, Reich et al. (2022), Durko (2022), Novella et al., (2023) and Lehtinen et al., (2023), who explore AEL (or AL) in HE, which I review here. In addition, the cognitive and affective dimensions in dialogic pedagogy are reviewed in this section.

In a quantitative study, Reich et al. (2022) discuss the outcomes of undergraduate psychology students trained in AEL in an 'empathic communication skills' course in the US, where in both face-to-face and online groups, the online groups received instruction asynchronously. The article reveals that in face-to-face tuition, students improve more in their communication skills than online. Yet, it is

important to stress that most of the instruction reported in this study was based on texts with some role-play practice in person, whereas in the synchronous online group, students were asked to practice with friends or family outside the group unlikely to have received any instruction on empathic communication skills. The article concludes that student confidence was a major factor, albeit it is not clear why. Furthermore, the instruction appears to be limited in that Reich et al. (2022) do not state which kind of 'empathic skills', participating students in their research had instruction in. Indeed, they state that open questions, nonverbal behaviours, managing internal reactions and multicultural competencies were not included in the empathic communication skills course. Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain from Reich et al.'s (2022) article whether AEL skills are effective when presented and practised in online synchronous learning.

Durko's (2022) mixed methods and thematic analysis study is relevant to the context of the pandemic because it highlights the 'overwhelming desire for social connections' of university undergraduates at a US university, who were likely to be concerned about returning to face-to-face learning in early 2021 due to fear of catching Covid-19. Regarding AEL, findings in Durko's study (2022) reveal that in general undergraduates at a university in Texas found they felt they were more attentive when learning online than in person and more 'interactivity' was noticed. Attention or attending to others might be significant regarding Gordon's (1951) theory in that AEL involves considerable attention to others, as well as the need for social connections, which students found to be lacking during the pandemic. However, whether student participants meant attention to other students, the tutor or the content of the online class or a mix of these is unclear in Durko's article.

Novella et al. (2023) illustrate an online university Japanese language learning conversation club for undergraduates that took place in Zoom breakout rooms, which benefitted students' conversation skills and participation in an extracurricular Japanese as a foreign language conversation club in Indonesia. Three Japanese first language students volunteered to attend from their university in Japan to assist (Novella et al. (2023). It is not clear whether the club groups were set up and facilitated by tutors or students or how the 'Guide Conversation Method' they describe works, but what I find interesting is that Novella et al.

(2023) emphasise the importance of the interactive nature of the conversation, both speaking and listening. The interactive nature of the conversation is possible online. It also indicates Communicative Interactional Competence within a social constructivist paradigm (Walsh, 2006) is possible in online synchronous learning. Therefore, there might be a tentative connection to AEL skills in that listening and speaking were important. What is noteworthy in Novella et al.'s article (2023) is that the conversation practice in the clubs was cross-cultural between Indonesian and Japanese students, as well as the following point:

> 'Psychologically young people as individuals have a need to receive appreciation, they need appreciation from others in order to get satisfaction from what they have achieved.' Novella et al., (2023:3)

It is possible, though not stated, that 'appreciation' comes from listening and the empathy warmth that may have been shown between the students, as described by Gordon (1951). Indeed, respect for friends in Japan is highlighted in Machi's article (2018) regarding Oral Paraphrasing, which Machi explains is a common feature of conversations between friends in Japanese society, where respect is of high importance in all interpersonal communication. OP requires the need to listen with considerable attention to a speaker. This is key to SGLCs.

In a relevant article to AEL skills, contextualised in SGLCs in online synchronous communication, Lehtinen et al. (2023) explore the concepts of co-construction of knowledge and socioemotional interaction among pre-service student educators at a university in Finland. Within a social constructivist paradigm, Lehtinen et al. (2023) explain that critical thinking can be achieved through the co-construction of knowledge that involves talk, dialogue and open questioning. They emphasise that in teacher education socioemotional interaction is fundamental to relationships, classroom management and support through listening actively and humour. Their qualitative study conducted among nine participating students and one tutor using content and interaction analysis of videoed conversations in the main room and (as videoed by student participants) in two breakout rooms. Communication in SGLCs was analysed including humour such as nods and laughs.

The context of Lehtinen et al.'s research (2023) can be compared with the context of my study, SGLCs, both within HE. In Lehtinen et al.'s study (2023) of student educators, conducted in Finland, the idea of sharing experiences is embedded in

the concept of collaboration in the process of oral communication and the co-creation of ideas, which are helpful towards critical thinking. Their research is significant because it reveals student educators' deep sharing of experiences and attempt to understand other student group members' values. These processes were indeed found to benefit student educators' critical thinking, as well as the reduction on feelings of anxiety between group members. This is of specific relevance because Lehtinen's research (2023) was conducted during the aftermath of the pandemic and in online synchronous learning. Similarly, my study is comparable to Lehtinen's research in that both their research and my study consider models related to oral communication. Yet my work differs in some respect as I am interested in AEL, which originally came from psychotherapy, especially the importance of the listening aspect and its affects on relationships, active participation and learning. In other words, the empathic or socioemotional aspect of AEL. Nevertheless, Lehtinen et al. (2023) mention Active (Empathic) Listening and the socioemotional aspect but there may be a slight difference.

Relevant to my study and the context of online synchronous learning in SGLCs, Marion Heron and associates' research in England (Heron, 2023; Heron et al., 2023a; Heron et al., 2023b) and the study by Lehtinen et al. (2023) in Finland are significant because they were modelled on learning in seminars and students' oral communication.

As mentioned in my introduction, I am especially interested in peer relationships in an online synchronous environment and the impact of AEL from a psychological perspective. The psychological perspective has its roots in the work of Rogers and associates, and subsequently in Bodie's and associates research in communication studies that was initially based on Rogers' work. Lehtinen (2023) explain in relation to the student educator participants' in their study, peer relationships were also an important aspect of the learning described in their article. The importance of peer relationships appears to have been enhanced through AEL and oral communication, in other words the backwards and forwards interaction in conversations. This may be significant within a socially constructed communicative framework.

Respect is mentioned as important to the learning and teaching ethos in Heron et al.'s (2023b) article. I agree that respect is extremely important, especially

regarding multinational classrooms. For example, in relation to students in those countries where respect towards teachers and others is of the utmost importance, such as China and Japan, students may not be confident to speak in class. This point can be compared to Machi's article (2018) about friendships and respect in in Japanese society.

In my collaborative article (pilot study) with Nursing students, OP was found to be beneficial to communication in online synchronous learning conversations (Fromm et al., 2021). Here, students were provided with the opportunity to listen to each other while talking about academic texts and then paraphrase their understanding to others in a small group. In this article, the student co-authors explain, as cited in their own words, that according to their findings, through practising OP in synchronous online sessions they were able to learn from each other, enhance their communication and, subsequently, improve their academic writing.

In this collaborative article with student authors, we conclude that facilitating and practising Active Listening and Oral Paraphrasing may be helpful learning skills in synchronous online learning (Fromm et al., 2021). The article states that the breakout rooms allowed the students to work in groups independently without interference from the tutor (me) unless they asked for advice. Through developing their AEL skills, OP and Asking OQs interactional competence appears to have been achieved in that these AEL skills may allow students the possibility for learning to be student-centred when the tutor is outside the breakout room in that they can focus more on each other than the tutor. It is important to stress that participating student authors had received instruction and practice in two AEL skills, Listening with Attention and OP, while the third, Asking Open Questions was only briefly mentioned and practised, within the Weger et al. (2014) model. I explore some difficulties I have noticed regarding non-verbal communication (NVC) in the context of online synchronous learning in the next section.
(paragraph in red was moved from the previous section)
According to Marion Heron et al. (2023b), in online synchronous learning, the process of communication itself is key in education at all levels, including secondary, foundation and HE. What is more it is in the communication, also referred to as talk or educational dialogue, within a social constructivist paradigm that is important. Here, educational dialogue, in a 'dialogic pedagogy' in ~~Marion~~

Heron's work, is beneficial to students' active participation because it involves group interaction to understand and justify what was said (Heron, 2023; Heron et al., 2023a). Active participation is about students being cognitively involved in the learning process and being aware of it (Heron, et al. 2023b). Dialogue is important in pedagogy, including in OSL, (Heron, 2023). This is because in addition to understanding and justification, it also involves the processes of explanation, elaboration and questioning (Heron et al., 2023b), which are central to learning and active participation and important within cognitive and affective dimensions.

Dialogic pedagogy, as conceptualised by Alexander (2020), and oracy (listening and speaking) are considered in the online synchronous learning (OSL) context in HE (Heron et al. 2021; Heron, 2023b; Atkins and Heron, 2024). In relation to Alexander's six dialogic principles (2020), Heron et al. (2021) consider each one within OSL in their findings from the perspectives of university language teachers, which I describe here and compare with AEL skills to then consider further in relation to my findings in the discussion chapter.

- The collective principle and students working together is possible in OSL where students are required to focus more on oral interaction because some of the NVC afforded in the classroom is missing. This requires students to engage in oral conversation, which is also important for OP in my study.

- The reciprocal principle is important for listening in OSL, which involves the need for listening with more concentration, hence Listening with Attention in AEL. This is because it is important to listen with attention to be able to perform the oral paraphrasing.

- A supportive environment is a key affective dimension in dialogic teaching and AEL that may help to build confidence among students and share ideas, including for those who may be shy. It is significant to the relationship between affective and cognitive (performance) in OSL so that students feel safe to contribute to conversations. Yet findings from a dialogic approach focus more on individual talk than the collaborative. This is a particularly important point to compare with my findings regarding AEL skills in the

discussion. In my case, the focus was more on the group than the tutor to student interaction.

- The deliberative principle was not significant in Heron et al.'s (2021) findings but could tentatively help students express their thinking.

- The cumulative principle was not evident in the findings in that the tutor had to initiate most of the conversations.

- The purposeful principle relates to the tutor's planning and error correction, which might be more personal in OSL because of the physical distance between the tutor and the students.

It is important to note that Heron et al.'s (2021) findings may differ from the context of my study because in their work there is more of a focus on the teacher-student relationship than on peer relationships and their study is considered from the perspectives of tutors. In my study the focus is on AEL skills according to and from the perspectives of the students. I consider student perspectives in my Research Question.

Atkins and Heron (2024) relate Alexander's (2020) principles of dialogic classroom talk to oracy (listening and speaking) and consider it in the OSL context in HE. Here, they explore cognitive, affective, physical and linguistic dimensions of language learning in OSL based on an Oracy Skills Framework originally developed for the classroom (Mercer et al., 2017, cited in Atkins and Heron, 2024). I shall explain my understanding of these dimensions, according to Atkins and Heron (2024) and relate them to AEL skills in my discussion chapter.

The cognitive dimension in oracy includes clarifying, such as asking questions and checking for clarification (Atkins and Heron, 2024). This is interesting because in my teaching and pilot study (Fromm et al., 2021), I have noticed that OP was helpful for clarifying and checking understanding, which in OSL appeared to benefit participating students in my collaborative article. OP can also be used for clarification, which can be in the form of a question as I have explained in relation to Gordon's suggestions in group psychotherapy (1951) mentioned in Section X,

such as 'So you mean …?'. Asking Open Questions are skills likely to be beneficial towards students' critical thinking that would fall within the cognitive dimension. One difficulty here is that the cognitive affective dimensions overlap. This indicates that students can find it difficult to ask questions (Atkins and Heron, 2024), which might inhibit the cognitive ability of actively asking questions.

On the affective dimension, which refers to the social aspect of oral communication with others, as well as confidence, participating students in Atkins and Heron's findings (2024) are reported to say what they think without listening to what others have said. This is important in relation to Gordon's assertion (1951) that members of a group do not necessarily pay attention to each other, which often affects how the conversation flows and group cohesion. This can negatively impact engagement in OSL in HE. In other words, it will be necessary to consider participating students' AEL skills and whether they did listen with attention in my findings and discussion chapters. While it is suggested that foreign language students need to adapt how they ask questions and use a range of questioning techniques in OSL, examples are not provided (Atkins and Heron, 2024).

The physical dimension relates to voice, volume and pronunciation that may be more difficult to hear online, and body language, which can be missing in OSL (Atkins and Heron, 2024) as I have discussed in Chapter 2, Section 2.3. In the linguistic dimension, student participants state that in OSL there is less of a flowing conversation and more of a question-and-answer situation that renders the online environment inauthentic (Atkins and Heron, 2024). Hence, it will be interesting to analyse and discuss my findings to see whether AEL skills can mitigate some of these physical and linguistic issues in OSL.

Cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions are defined in the context online synchronous student engagement in Martin and Borup's literature review (2022). Many HE tutors have reported a perceived lack of engagement in OSL in their university students (Martin and Borup, 2022). These three dimensions are framed through communication, interaction, presence, collaboration and community to understand student engagement in online synchronous learning (Martin and Borup, 2022). According to Martin and Borup (2022),

> "*Online learner engagement* is the productive, affective and behavioural energy that a learner exerts interacting with others and learning materials and/or through learning activities and experiences in online learning environments (Martin and Borup, 2022:164)**.**

It is interesting that Marin and Borup (2022) and Atkins and Heron (2024) state that OSL may require increased cognitive engagement than when face to face in view of some of the physical challenges, such as not being able to see the whole person when online. In relation to affective engagement in educational psychology, which is also known as emotional engagement, relationship building is essential (Martin and Borup, 2022). Students need to feel they are involved, belong to a community in which they are likely to enjoy and feel confident about their learning, rather than feel anxious or bored about their learning (Martin and Borup, 2023, Jones et al., 2023; Gravett et al., 2023a) and thus more likely to create positive relationships within their learning groups. This is despite learning spaces in OSL being different and generally more challenging than in the classroom (Gravett et al., 2023b). My idea of the small group learning conversations in the online academic conversation club is important to community building and affective engagement, which relates to creating warm and empathic relationships as explained in group psychotherapy (Gordon, 1951).

Moreover, behavioural engagement relates to physical energy or behaviour in learning, such as how students use the available technology online (Martin and Borup, 2022) and issues with not being able to see gestures and body language properly (Atkins and Heron, 2024). Behavioural engagement includes how students manage Small Group Learning Conversations in online synchronous learning, which I explain further in the next chapter, Section 4.7 in relation to planning and facilitating the online synchronous academic conversation clubs.

In OSL, OP may 'shape learning contributions'. This can be related to Communication Interactional Competence, mentioned in the previous section, and that shaping learner contributions requires cognitive input by students (Walsh, 2006). Similarly, in OSL Moorhouse et al. (2023:116) explain Communication Interactional Competence as 'taking a learner response and doing something with

it rather than simply accepting it'. Moorhouse et al. (2023) have found some limitations with OSL compared with the classroom environment. For example, they discuss that there can be more teacher talk time in OSL than in face-to-face contexts, despite breakout rooms taking some time away from actual teaching and learning because of the time needed for the tutor to set them up. In my study breakout rooms would allow students the possibility to practise AEL skills without the interference of a tutor. This should reduce teacher talk time.

In summary of this section, there appears to be an absence of substantive literature about AEL skills in online synchronous learning. Lehtinen et al. (2023) and my collaborative article (Fromm et al., 2021), suggest online synchronous learning platforms may allow interactional competence and collaborative learning in SGLCs for students who had received instruction in specific communication skills. ~~Furthermore~~ Novella et al.'s article (2023) is significant regarding interpersonal and cross-cultural collaborative learning in SGLCs in online synchronous environment. Furthermore, dialogic and oracy pedagogy has revealed that cognitive and affective dimensions of learning are important for student engagement in OSL, which I have reviewed, especially in Heron and associates work (Atkins and Heron, 2024; Heron et al., 2021; Heron, 2023; Heron et al., 2023a; Heron et al., 2023b) and Martin and Borup's article (2022). Collaborative learning, as reviewed in these articles related to online synchronous learning, appears to have been possible during the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.5. Active Empathic Listening Model in Online Synchronous Learning

Regarding face-to-face communication studies, Weger et al.'s model (2014) of Active Listening, as explained at the beginning of Section 3 in this chapter, consists of three elements; non-verbal communication (NVC), Oral Paraphrasing (OP), and Asking Open Questions (OQs). Through my teaching using online synchronous platforms, especially Zoom in which breakout rooms can be set up quickly and efficiently, I have noticed some challenges in relation to NVC, explained in Chapter 2. Challenges in online synchronous learning include the inability to hear, see and communicate well in an online synchronous environment (Grondin et al., 2019). In addition, I have found that it is more difficult to listen to and understand

others in a SGLC in online synchronous communication than in person. As a tutor, when online, I need to be more careful to check instructions and ask for clarification because it is much harder to hear and see students and my perception is that it is also harder for them to understand me and other students.

Therefore, it is likely that it is more important to rely on closer Listening with Attention (LwA) because it can be difficult to hear and see others in SGLCs on online synchronous platforms even when cameras are on. Indeed, WIFI outages can occur which are nobody's fault (Durko, 2022), even when temporary for a few seconds. Therefore, NVC can be problematic in online synchronous learning because of the challenges to see and hear others clearly. Oral Paraphrasing is likely to be helpful because of the importance to clarify what has been said in the SGLC. The Venn diagrams below compare Weger et al.'s (2014) model related to oral communication in person with my Active Empathic Listening model in OSL. To differentiate the two models, I call their model Active Listening and mine Active Empathic Listening.
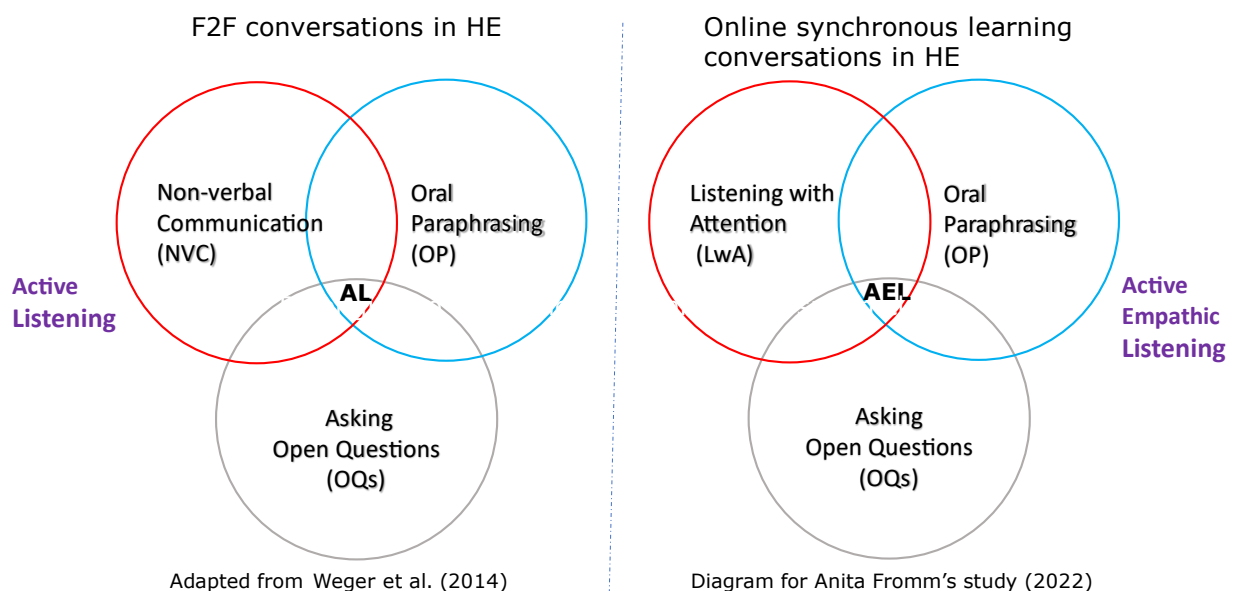
Figure 3-2 Comparison of Active Listening and Active Empathic Listening Models

Both models comprise of OP and Asking OQs but differ between Non-Verbal communication and LwA. Listening with Attention may imply not only listening to what is said, but how it is said and paying attention to NVC at the same time. In other words, it often possible to listen to a person's words and notice whether they are smiling and/or nodding at the same time. In healthcare, communication includes paying attention to NVC and listening attentively, as well as to tone of voice (Moss, 2017; Undermann-Boggs, 2023).

What is important is that my model differs from Weger et al.'s (2014) model in that my model is related to online synchronous learning rather than face-to-face learning. In my model Listening with Attention is essential because some of the non-verbal communication in OSL is missing, whereas in person non-verbal communication is more noticeable. NVC is an important skill in nursing (Moss, 2017; Undermann-Boggs, 2023). However, nursing students working in SGLCs online is a different context. LwA in OSL would involve more cognitive input because of the need for closer attention when online due to missing gestures and other body language being less evident (Atkins and Heron, 2024). A sense of warmth, empathy and belonging can be achieved through LwA, which would be helpful towards building relationships in OSL. Warmth, empathy and belonging are important to learning in groups and relationships that are central to the supportive and hence affective dimension of learning.

It is possible that through LwA, closer relationships and a sense of belonging to a small group engaged in conversation can be achieved, especially given the challenges of learning online and the need for interpersonal connections during and in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns. Henceforth, I have focused on Active Empathic Listening (AEL) in my dissertation, as in my title and Research Question.

3.6.   Tutor reflections - My learning and teaching experience of AEL

While considering my reflections regarding AEL, I have kept a Reflective Journal of some of my conversations with friends, family and students (prior to my study) that considers how I may or may not use AEL in conversations. Initially, my Reflective Journal was related to my Oral Paraphrasing and that of others in

conversations with me. When I started my doctoral journey, I originally intended to focus on OP. I thought it was important to reflect on my own thinking about OP in conversations, if I was going to be facilitating sessions in it.

Here are two examples from my Reflective Journal.

In my Reflective Journal, entry 9.10.2019, my husband stops me saying 'I am talking now' because I had interrupted him when talking or while he was briefly pausing to think. It seems that I do (sometimes) interrupt or jump in too quickly. Indeed, as Nancy Kline states in her book 'our thinking depends on the quality of our *attention* to each other' (Kline: 1999:12).

Despite regarding myself as generally being a shy person, here, I have learnt that I need to listen with more attention. Furthermore, I have learnt that OP works by first Listening with Attention before attempting to paraphrase. In the context of small group learning conversations (SGLCs), Kline's words are important because these imply learning is socially constructed. Learning does not seem to happen in a void (Jones et al., 2023) but rather within 'communities of practice' through regular interaction between members of a group who share an interest or concern (Wenger, 2011, cited in Jones et al., 2023:6). Attentive listening is important in a SGLC between students from a range of cultures and backgrounds. Indeed, prejudice, which I experienced at times in my education as a child, comes from a lack of understanding and knowledge of others. Attentive listening may help understanding and knowledge of others.

A second example from my Reflective Journal on 12.10.2018 relates to a telephone conversation with a friend. I mentioned that I was going to be researching OP. During that conversation, I reflected on how I use OP in my own EdD studies when I don't understand what is being presented and then noted the following:

> *I have noticed that I sometimes paraphrase what the tutor has said, even when I don't understand, or it hasn't clicked. As I paraphrase and begin to talk it through, it usually becomes clearer. I think that some of my international students may have an idea but cannot yet put it into words. Possibly they are too shy to share it for fear it may be wrong, as I had felt in class when I was younger, but maybe OP could have helped me to participate when I had wanted to but was too shy to do so - but back then I was not aware of this skill.*

Possibly, my own shyness has caused me to reflect on shy students. Littlewood (2009) maintains that perceptions of East Asian students as being quiet in the classroom is a stereotype. Littlewood claims many educators would argue otherwise, however, Littlewood's (2009) findings are interesting and suggest HE students in Hong Kong and China prefer classes where students are provided with the opportunities of interaction. In the context of SGLCs, OP has been helpful for me personally. However, I am wary that my own lived experience of OP is biased in that OP was beneficial to me in an EdD session, yet other students might have different experiences in a small group of learners.

I have also kept a log of my learning related to teaching of AEL both prior to Covid-19 in face-to-face teaching and since the beginning of the pandemic in an online environment. In the first entry, I reflected on an in-person speaking class on a Pre-Sessional English programme for international students on 14.11.2018. After explaining and some discussion about LwA and OP, including providing some necessary phrases, I walked around the groups at a slight distance as they were talking together and afterwards made the following note:

> *Students were engaged in conversation for about 25 mins. I noticed that the conversation seemed to flow well and that every student was participating. I only needed to give a few words of encouragement or helped with vocabulary occasionally. I then had to stop them because it was the end of the lesson.*

Related to researcher reflexivity, the point about students participating is important as Etherington (2004:29) states.

> 'When another person mirrors, reflects or paraphrases our words we can notice (sometimes for the first time) what we are *really* thinking or feeling. When they summarize what we have been telling them we might begin to create links between ideas, stories, experiences, and relationships of which we had been hitherto unaware'.

With examples such as the one above in mind, I started the first Online Academic Conversation Club for MSc Adult and Mental Health Nursing students in March 2021 for my pilot study. In the first session, students gave the following feedback after talking in a breakout room. I noted the following:

> *'It was a good conversation, the others were actively listening.*

Therefore, from early in my EdD study, I felt optimistic that AEL skills appeared to be an effective set of skills when facilitating online synchronous SGLCs for students, yet as explained in the previous chapter, these skills require practice as Rogers and Farson (1987/1957) acknowledge.

Hence, my experience of teaching AEL prior to my main study may have been shaped by listening to my students and my possible understanding of their experiences. As explained, I have been shy at times in my own learning, which interferes with my own perception of AEL here. Nevertheless, I have noticed some instances when I may sometimes interrupt a conversation too soon. However, it is important that I am open to other opinions in relation to AEL skills in that they may be beneficial to some students, but likely to be a different or less positive or even a negative experience for others in a small group learning conversation.

3.7. Summary

The concept of AEL skills in this study within OSL is based on three combined aspects: Listening with Attention, Oral Paraphrasing and Asking Open Questions. In the field of education and especially HE online synchronous learning, there is a little research on AEL as a learning skill, yet this literature review, my personal experience of learning and teaching it, suggests that AEL may benefit learning and enhance good relationships and active participation in a SGLC. Furthermore, cognitive and affective dimensions in both dialogic pedagogy and oracy skills are aspects of learning skills to consider in relation to my findings in the discussion (chapter 10). The next chapter discusses online learning, especially online synchronous learning, and describes how I planned to facilitate it in the club groups for my main study.

4. Developing Online Academic Conversation Clubs

4.1. Outline

Despite the challenges of learning online during and in the aftermath of Lockdowns, discussed in Chapter 2, there were also many benefits. This chapter explains some of the benefits for learning online at the time, especially synchronously. This chapter also explains how I facilitated learning in the club, a scheme of work (SOW), including my anticipations. It explains my aims and objectives for the club meetings that are aligned to my RQ. It also includes some example materials and an extract from my Reflective Journal of my plans, some of what happened in sessions and my reflections. Particular attention is paid to considering student backgrounds and ethnicity. In the final section I consider my reflections, which relates to teaching in the club and my role as a tutor-researcher and in tutor to student relations.

4.2. Online communication and learning

There are some advantages of online synchronous and asynchronous teaching. For example, in a non-medical prescribing course delivered both synchronously and asynchronously in Dublin, Forde and Gallagher's (2020) mixed-method findings of 19 student respondents reveal that online learning can deepen knowledge, promote critical thinking, enable engagement with tutors and between students. This is despite challenges they state for healthcare students in Ireland, such as workload and other time constraints, pressure to succeed academically and practical sessions not being possible during the pandemic. They reveal some difficulties for students to express themselves online, which are not specified, but other than technology lapses further difficulties are not provided.

In 1999 Garrison et al. proposed a framework to support computer mediated communication in HE, the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model. This has been adopted in other research; for example Akyol and Garrison (2011), Garrison (2022), Dickison (2021) and Zhang et al. (2023). The CoI is based on Dewey's concept that 'education is a collaborative reconstruction of experience' (Garrison, et al. 1999:92). This is important with reference to other social constructivist and communicative theories, within which practise in oral AEL skills in the online

environment may fit that contributes to a useful base for considering my study. The CoI model consists of three aspects: cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2011). Cognitive presence includes learning and critical thinking. Social presence incorporates students communicating together and being there. Teaching presence represents the teacher who may facilitate learning or student group members who may lead the conversation. Given these three aspects of presence, it might be possible to consider how AEL skills may be thought of in terms of cognitive presence, how participants relate to others and express their ideas (social presence), as well as the role of a facilitator in the club sessions.

In a comparative study of asynchronous and synchronous learning in HE in the US during the pandemic, Zhang et al. (2023) adapt the CoI model and conclude that there appear to be better outcomes in synchronous learning, especially regarding social presence, than in asynchronous learning. The Zhang et al. (2023) model consists of four elements: cognitive presence, social presence, teaching presence and, in addition to the Garrison CoI model, self-evaluated performance. Zhang et al. (2023) highlight the benefits of synchronous communication for more engaged learning conversations compared with asynchronous communication, including opportunities for tutors and students to ask questions.

Zhang et al.'s (2023) findings in the US conducted among 170 undergraduates of a range of ethnicities, where approximately half the sample were over the age of 30, are of particular relevance to my study. Their findings reveal that in synchronous learning, online real-time conversations are not only possible but can be significantly beneficial to social presence. Social presence in synchronous learning and teaching, which Zhang et al. (2023) discuss, has positive effects on relationships between students and between students and tutors, the learning experience and in student participants' identification to their institution. This is relevant in relation to Jones et al.'s book (2023) that emphasises the importance of creating a sense of belonging in an online community. A sense of belonging during and in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns is likely to have been lacking for the participants in my study, as well as for many other students globally.

Zhang et al.'s (2023) research in the US also finds that in synchronous learning, student participants' self-evaluated performance and teacher presence appears to be better than in asynchronous learning, however, there was little difference in cognitive presence between synchronous and asynchronous learning platforms. They attribute less difference in cognitive activity because this is often dependent on a student's self-motivation, which may be regardless of the teaching format. What is important here is that Zhang's (2023) Community of Inquiry model is relevant to SGLCs and the online clubs contextualised in my study because they were facilitated entirely synchronously. Finally, Zhang et al.'s (2023) study is relevant because they highlight how especially in online synchronous learning, social presence can be maintained between students learning in groups.

4.3.   Online synchronous communication & learning

Online synchronous learning (OSL) platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet can be beneficial for participating in SGLCs, according to research in several countries. In Indonesia, Google Meet is reported to have been effective in a reading and discussion skills course in English for engineering students (Al Faruq et al., 2022). Nevertheless, Al Faruq et al.'s (2022) qualitative research based on questionnaires and interviews states that one third of the respondents were reluctant to contribute to discussions in OSL, however, some appeared to be more confident to do so when meeting in smaller groups outside class. In the US, OSL using Zoom with tourism students, as Durko (2022) report, provides generally better participation, academic achievement and mental health compared with other platforms of remote learning.

As explained in the previous chapter, shyness to speak in SGLCs is important to consider, which may be regarded as a positive or negative attribute in different cultural contexts in traditional classrooms (Liu and Jackson, 2008; Pattapong, 2010; Mohammadian, 2013; Akinbode, 2015; Gilbert, 2015). However, some students may feel or may be noticed by others to seem more confident to speak in OSL compared with in-person learning. This is often attributed to cameras being on or using the chat function, as observed in studies in several countries, for example Sugino (2021) in Japan; Yaniafari and Rihardini (2021) in Indonesia; Yarmand et al. (2021) in the US, Jayasundara et al. (2022) in the UK and

Jayasundara et al. (2023) in Sri Lanka. Breakout rooms in OSL may be beneficial to confidence in contributing orally when the tutor is not present. Before the pandemic, one tutor researcher in Britain explains how once students are familiar with how breakout rooms work, they can be helpful to increase confidence in collaborative learning and build peer to peer relationships in small groups (Chandler, 2016).

The club I facilitated in 2020-2021 for my pilot study for MSc Adult and Mental Health Nursing students appears to have been beneficial to collaboration in a small group research project conducted in Zoom breakout rooms (Fromm et al., 2021), which resulted in the students contributing to an article, that was also written in breakout rooms during club sessions. This can also be seen as evidence of collaboration. However, it is important to note that no more than eight students attended any of the sessions and breakout rooms were usually facilitated for between three and four students. In the clubs and in general, I try to avoid breakout rooms of only two students because if one student experiences connectivity or technical issues and they are expelled, then the one remaining student is in a breakout room on their own and put at a disadvantage. Putting the remaining student into another room by the facilitator is likely to be interrupting to other conversations.

It is less clear whether OSL benefits active participation, in large groups, in other words oral contributions (Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2022), for example in groups of over 100 students, or breakout rooms with more than six students. Indeed, lack of active participation in HE during and since the pandemic, including online, is a concern for lecturers (Martin and Borup, 2022; Williams, 2022; UPP Foundation Student Futures Commission, 2022). Nevertheless, it is important not to focus on deficit models (Gilbert, 2015; Farenga, 2019; Jones et al., 2023). Here, Zhang et al.'s (2003) Community of Inquiry model is of relevance to SGLCs in that social presence and a sense of community in OSL may be established by the students themselves as partners rather than in a top-down tutor to student model. In her book, Karen Gravett (2023) maintains that educators should consider students as partners who matter, which is essential to avoid deficit models in HE and widening participation.

4.4.   Online Academic Conversation Clubs - Literature and aims

Literature focusing on online learning clubs during the pandemic appears to be sparse. However, a few online journal clubs using social media for professional development, for example in rheumatology (Ahmed et al., 2020) and medical education (Thamman et al., 2020) are reported. In addition, virtual book clubs in HE are thought to be beneficial for peer learning, as stated by Sandrone et al. (2020). Nevertheless, there do not seem to be extensive studies about journal or book clubs. An English language speaking club in Saudi Arabia (Elnadeef and Abdala, 2019) and a Japanese language and literature club in Japan (Novella et al., 2023) do focus on practising conversation for language learning. Such clubs are likely to be of educational value, yet neither Elnadeef and Abdala (2019) nor Novella et al. (2023) state specific pedagogical aims and details of how conversation was practised, other than that they maintain these clubs offer students beneficial conversational practice.

This means that the clubs I facilitated, discussed in this study, may be unique in that the clubs here had specific pedagogical aims and anticipated outcomes in SGLCs in online synchronous learning (described in the paragraph below). Unlike the language clubs cited above, this club was not intended as a language learning or language practice exercise, despite being called an academic conversation club. Furthermore, participants had all been previously taught in the English language in Nigeria or Ghana, where English is the official language of education. This is despite a more decolonial view to support a move to include more instruction in the many indigenous languages in Nigeria and Ghana, where nevertheless, English remains the dominant medium of instruction in both countries (Anyidoho, 2018; Adekunle and Meroyi, 2023). In addition, pre-registration nursing students in the UK would have had to pass exams and an interview in English to be at the level required for admission onto the programme and to undertake placements in hospitals and community care.

The overall aim of the club was to provide opportunities for MHN students, who had volunteered to join the club in their free time in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, to have academic conversations (especially because they had had few opportunities to meet) while practising AEL skills. The following aims were

explained and discussed with club members in the first club meeting, allowing the possibility for members to make suggestions or changes:

1. To provide an opportunity for students to meet outside timetabled sessions in a friendly environment
2. To present, practise and reflect on AEL in SGLCs
3. To have conversations about academic topics of participants' choice related to their MHN studies, including some academic skills development (if or as requested by members)
4. To make new friends.

The anticipated learning outcomes of the club were for members to:
1. Have developed their AEL skills in SGLCs in online synchronous learning.
2. Have demonstrated AEL in OSL sessions by:

   a. Participating actively
   b. Developing confidence
   c. Discussing learning about academic topics of participants' choice, such as lectures and sections of academic texts
   d. Developing attentive listening skills to other members of the group
   e. Demonstrating the ability to clarify, understand and validate what is said in academic conversations through Oral Paraphrasing
   f. Being able to elaborate on what was said through Oral Paraphrasing and Asking open questions

3. Have developed good relationships with club members.

4.5.   Facilitating Active Empathic Listening in the clubs

I was kindly invited to an OSL session by a module lead to announce and explain the aims and anticipated outcomes of the club, as in the section above. Two participants from the previous year's club, who insisted they wanted to join again, spoke about their experiences to encourage new participants to join. The ten-minute introduction session and subsequent club meetings took place in two groups (which I have renamed Group C and Group D to differentiate between the

actual group names on the programme and the club groups). There were two separate groups on the programme because each group had been assigned different placement periods and timetables.

The club was open to any student in either group on the MSc second year MHN programme and attendance was voluntary. It was not part of any assessment and, due to the intensity of the programme and many other demands on the students, there was no work set between meetings. Students who wished to join were asked to email me to receive the Zoom link and slides in advance. Furthermore, I decided not to record the meetings for three reasons.

Firstly, I wanted members to practise AEL without resorting to recordings so that they would focus on listening. I did not have access to the module site where recordings are uploaded as student attendance in the clubs was voluntary and I was not a tutor on any MHN programme content module. Secondly, I am mindful of the fact that having cameras on may be disliked by some people. For example, due to gender and image as observed in Israel (Meishar-Tal and Forkosh-Baruch, 2022), which may be with regard to religious or other personal reasons. A student may have concerns about their appearance on camera, being recorded and there can be concerns of who or what is in the background (Castelli and Sarvari, 2021). Therefore, not recording students may help 'camera shy' club members to feel more confident to have cameras on during club meetings. Jayasundara et al. (2022) maintain that among STEM students at five UK universities it was beneficial to have cameras on in OSL because of the importance to comprehend non-verbal language. Being able to see group members and tutors is likely to benefit listening with attention. Finally, none of the participants revealed a learning issue necessitating the use of session recordings (or corresponding recording transcripts) after sessions when I asked them.

In addition, I explained why I felt it would be helpful for club members to have their cameras on and that they should inform me if they had any objections or difficulties with cameras on. Thirdly, I did not want to intrude on breakout room conversations and only entered in the case of students Asking me a question. I felt that if I stayed outside breakout rooms it was likely to be helpful for students in relationship building to each other, one of the club's aims. Having cameras on in breakout rooms may possibly have felt intrusive too.

4.6.   Scheme of Work

In conjunction with my literature review, reflections about AEL, my findings and reflexivity and tutor journals in my pilot study, I listed my anticipations in my teaching notes as part of my scheme of work (SoW) for main study as follows:

20/02/2022 SOW- Anticipations and actions

- *Members may not have met in person or know each other:*
  -provide time each session to get to know each other

  -include several breakouts with mix of different students to feedback and compare ideas in main room each time

  -ask whether members would like to share contact info. to keep in touch outside sessions in 1st session.

- *Given intensity of 2nd Year MSc MHN Programme & other time constraints:*
  -understand members may not be able to join every session so include some revision at the beginning of each session

  - tutor to provide attendance certificates and sign documents for students to gain points towards university's reward scheme (explained in intro to sessions and on 1st session slides)

  -invite all students who attend more than 4 out of 5 sessions in first part to attend second part of club (explain about interviews and ethics approval + add to slides)

  -provide an hour of academic skills development related to assessments as a 'thank you' for attending interviews, if they would like this

  -provide session time for members to find and think about lectures attended and texts read referred to or to be referred to in assignments rather than prep time outside sessions.

- *Members are likely to have experienced challenges during the pandemic.*
- *Awareness and conversations of EDI, especially with respect to international and minority students.*
- *Some students may not speak or write English as a first language.*
- *Members may not have previously been educated in the UK.*
- *MHN students may already have well developed oral communication skills, including possibly AEL.*
  -In the previous year's club, members explained that Active Listening and OP benefitted their academic writing skills- so this is likely to be a point to focus on (module leader was keen for this and to include session on developing academic argument for final (second) year MSc students).

The 2021-2022 club for MHN, for my main study, was organised into two parts (but both were shorter than the previous year due to an unexpected change in placement periods). The first part, of five one-hour meetings, concentrated on presenting, practising and reflecting on AEL mainly in relation to lectures and academic texts, as well as talking about aspects of their online learning and academic skills development, according to members' suggestions. I explained the following slide at the beginning of each of session in the first part, which shows the skills to be practised and conversation topics and was useful to me to follow as a schedule for my SOW.

Anita's Introduction & Club Aims
Weekly meeting schedule

5

Skills	Topics - Conversations about:
1. Introduction to Active Empathic Listening (AEL)	1. Online learning and academic skills
2. Understanding & using AEL	2. Understanding lectures
3. Oral Paraphrasing language 1	3. Understanding texts
4. Oral Paraphrasing language 2	4. Analysing texts
5. Revision of AEL	5. Developing your argument for academic writing

Slide 4-1 Outline of the club meetings (SoW)

The club continued into the second part because several club members asked to continue. The second part consisted of two two-hour meetings. It was shorter than Part 1, which was mainly due to club members being on placement that made it difficult to find times where all were available to meet since their individual timetables differed considerably from during the university teaching blocks when Part 1 took place.

In the first meeting of Part 1, topics were to be briefly revised, (I used the slide above as an aide-memoire) and I also included a brief discussion on Asking Open Questions (for which there was not time in the first part). The second half of the

first meeting and the rest of the second meeting culminated in the students working together to produce an extract for the school Podcast that was subsequently circulated around the school. The idea of the Podcast was for students to work in SGLC breakout rooms to consider their learning in the clubs about AEL. This involved preparing a text collaboratively that each member then read and record in the group on Zoom. One member chose to introduce the others in turn, briefly paraphrase what each said and provide an overall summary of what was said at the end of the Podcast extract. Each extract on the Podcast was introduced by the Assistant Associate Dean, Learning and Teaching Experience (see Appendix 4 for the transcript of the recording).

My rationale for the Podcast was to further develop members' AEL skills collaboratively through listening actively to each other's contributions, then orally paraphrasing what was said and Asking Open Questions to elaborate on what was said. Similarly, Yeh et al. (2021) explain that Podcasting can be beneficial to university students' listening and speaking skills when not speaking in their first language. In OSL it is just as important to clarify understanding for any person regardless of their first language because, as previously mentioned, technical glitches can occur (Grondin et al., 2019; Fromm, 2021; Calica and Paterson, 2023) or there may be challenges for some students because of lack of digital experience (Carolan et al., 2020; Losh, 2021) or digital poverty (Jones et al., 2023).

4.7. Example teaching sessions and materials

At the beginning of the first session, I introduced myself and briefly talked about both my personal and teaching background. This was important to relationship building between myself and the students and was a lead-in to explaining my ideas for the club, aims and anticipated outcomes. Nevertheless, I invited students to make suggestions about the content at any time if they wished. For example, I said, 'the club is for you so if you would like me to change anything or include any other skills or topics please ask me'. Indeed, student voices in course design should be included (Bovill et al., 2011). My position is to view the club members as partners rather than 'customers' and that attending the club would be 'enjoyable and fun', and as Gravett et al. (2020) maintain. The concept of students as partners may in turn encourage online synchronous engagement and be

valuable to the student experience, as previously explained in terms of 'communication, interaction, [social] presence, collaboration, and community' (Martin and Borup, 2022:1).

Next, in the first meeting, each student had the opportunity to introduce themselves when together in the main room and then further in breakout rooms SGLCs. It was also very important to try to establish good relationships between club members at the beginning. Indeed, 'learning about each other' is essential for classroom motivation (Dörnyei and Muir, 2019), the same I think would apply online. In addition, I wanted to talk openly about equality, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) being aware the club members were likely to be from a range of ethnic backgrounds and that a large majority of students on the university's MSc Nursing programme were Black or Asian (see Chapter 6, Section 6.4 which describes the sample as well as those members in the club not interviewed).

The following slides summarise the initial part of the first club meeting (excluding the title slide, which identifies the university and group).

Welcome to the club – Meeting 1 - Introductions

Celebrate Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Week!

"Nothing seems impossible until it's done!"

Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela. Getty images.
https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/photos/nelson mandela.

Anita's introduction & research

Please note: These slides will be put in the Practice 3 Module in Canvas in the club unit – meetings will not be recorded

3

Anita's story

Anita's EdD research

Ethics statement

ethics statement for PP slides 1.03.2022.pdf

Please refer to email for consent form and participant info sheet. Thank you.

Club member introductions

4

Please note: These slides will be put in the Practice 3 Module in Canvas in the club unit – meetings will not be recorded

Who are you?

Why have you joined the club?

Introduce yourself, then welcome another member!

Paraphrase what you remember about the person who spoke before you.

5

Anita's Introduction & Club Aims
Weekly meeting schedule

Skills	Topics - Conversations about:
1. Introduction to Active Empathic Listening (AEL)	1. Online learning and academic skills
2. Understanding & using AEL	2. Understanding lectures
3. Oral Paraphrasing language 1	3. Understanding texts
4. Oral Paraphrasing language 2	4. Analysing texts
5. Revision of AEL	5. Developing your argument for academic writing

Anita Fromm

This week:
Active Empathic Listening
Online learning & academic skills

6

What is Active Empathic Listening?

Put some ideas in the chat

Then discuss

Slide 4-2 Slides [a-e] from first section of 1st club meeting, Part 1

Each session started with a five-minute 'warm-up' activity, in which the students could have a general chat and/or choose to discuss a picture and quotation provided each meeting of an inspirational person across Black or Asian cultures. This was to show respect for any Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic students in the club. This is an activity, which I have been including in much of the teaching materials I have produced since 2019 in consideration of awarding gaps between Black, Asian & Ethnic Minority students and White students.

Slide 4-3 Example slide of inspirational Black leader in respect of Black club members

While creating the slides, I found it was not easy to think of Black or Asian inspirational people, especially female ones. This led me to reflect on how these and other ethnic groups are often discriminated and less likely to have a voice. Yet, I wanted the students to feel they can also be successful and have a positive learning experience by identifying with people of similar ethnicities as themselves and in consideration of other members across ethnicities. After students had introduced themselves to the whole group and then in smaller breakout groups two students revealed having met famous Black or White people and reflected on this. Other students praised those members verbally or by using the clapping icon. This shows active participation and students' appreciation of each other.

I shall now provide an example of one meeting, meeting 3, in part 1 of the club through the following slides. (These exclude the title slide that identifies the university and group.)

Welcome back to the Online Academic Conversation Club!

Sadiq Khan – Mayor of London

"Everyone- regardless of their background, wealth, race, faith, gender, sexual orientation or age - should be able to fulfil their potential and succeed."

How might you consider and incorporate equality, diversity & inclusion in your conversations at university?

Sadiq Khan. Getty images. https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/photos/sadiq-khan.

3

Weekly meeting schedule

Skills	Topics - Conversations about:
1. Introduction to Active Empathic Listening (AEL)	1. Online learning and academic skills
2. Understanding & using AEL	2. Understanding lectures
3. Oral Paraphrasing language 1	3. Understanding texts
4. Oral Paraphrasing language 2	4. Analysing texts
5. Revision of AEL	5. Developing your argument for academic writing

This week
Oral Paraphrasing Language 1
Understanding texts

Revision from last week –

Understanding & using Active empathic listening –
Understanding texts

What do you remember?

What is Oral Paraphrasing (OP)?

1. Think for a couple of minutes

2. Think of examples of language you could use to paraphrase a text orally

   Discuss 1 and 2 above in breakout rooms

   Answers on next slide!

Example phrases:
Try to learn these or similar!

Lynch & Anderson (1992: 21)	Adapted from Gordon (1951: 350)	Whitcomb and Whitcomb (2013: 90)
Getting confirmation:	Reassuring	Empathy/compassion
➢ *So, you mean that …?*	➢ So, you feel …	➢ 'I sensed some frustration …'
➢ *So, what you are saying is that …?*	➢ I gather (think) that you mean …	➢ 'the pieces are coming together'
➢ *So, you are telling me that I can't …?*	(chapter in Carl Rogers)	--------------------------
		• Theo Gilbert said: 'Sorry?'

OP Practice

Find a recent text you have read – quickly re-read the **abstract** (3 mins)

1. What is it about?
2. How would you explain it to a student who has *not* read it or does *not* study in your field?

Take turns to talk about the text (breakout room) – use the OP language as in or similar to the above slide! (15 mins)

OP Feedback

What did you talk about?

What went well?

What was difficult?

What is your opinion about using OP to talk about texts?

Next week

More practice with OP and analysing texts

References   (APA - School of Health & Social Work Style)

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Gordon, T. (1951). Group Centred Leadership & Administration. In C. Rogers (Ed.),
    Client-Centred Therapy. (pp. 320-384). Constable.

Lynch, T. & Anderson, K. (1992). *Study Speaking* . Cambridge University Press.

Whitcomb, C. & Whitcomb, L. (2013). *Effective interpersonal and team communication skills for engineers*.
    Wiley. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118514283 .

Slide 4-4 Part 1 slides for Meeting 3 of the online academic conversation club

When facilitating the clubs, I tried to include as few slides as possible to give plenty of time for conversations, so timings were approximate. The slides below are from the second part of the club, Meeting 1, which included revision of Part 1 sessions. I did not need to prepare any new slides for the second meeting in Part 2 because this was where I planned for students to work intensively on the Podcast.

Today's meeting – 2 hours

1. Welcome back! ☺ ☺ ☺
2. Social chat
3. Revision of Part 1
4. Practice of skills learned in Part 1 and/or asking Open Questions (Members' choice)
5. Planning club contribution to HSK Student Pod
6. Availability for next (final) meeting & Pod recording

ethics statement for PP slides 1.03.2022.pdf

Weekly meeting schedule - Part 1

Skills	Topics - Conversations about:
1. Introduction to Active Empathic Listening (AEL)	1. Online learning and academic skills
2. Understanding & using AEL	2. Understanding lectures
3. Oral Paraphrasing language 1	3. Understanding texts
4. Oral Paraphrasing language 2	4. Analysing texts
5. Revision of AEL	5. Developing your argument for academic writing

F2F conversations in
HE communication training

Online synchronous
conversations in HE groupwork

Non verbal
commun-
ication
(NVC)

Oral
Para-
phrasing
(OP)

AL

Listening
with
Attention
(LwA)

Oral Para-
phrasing
(OP)

AEL

Asking
Open
Questions
(OQs)

Asking
Open
Questions
(OQs)

Adapted from Weger et al. (2014)

Diagram for Anita Fromm's study (2022)

5

Next session

➢ Finish planning OACC contribution to HSK Student Pod
➢ Questions for Pod
➢ Assign roles
➢ Practise for timing
➢ Record Pod

➢ Feedback & social chat (party invite!)
➢ Mini individual interviews for Anita's research   (approx. 15 mins each)

Slide 4-5 Part 2 slides for Meeting 3 of the online academic conversation club

Slide 2 and 3 in the above series served as a reminder to revise what we discussed in the first part of the club. In the first part, Slide 3 was discussed in breakout room conversations by the members and ideas about the meaning of AEL were then shared in the main room.

In the second part of the club members worked on discussing the content of the Podcast first in breakout rooms then in the main room and subsequently creating

the text for the recording, each member taking a role and speaking. There was over two weeks between the two Part 2 meetings because students were on placements, so it was difficult to find a time when all were free. The Zoom link of the Podcast was sent to a School technologist, who kindly added the club's Pod extract to the monthly School of Health and Social work Podcast with an introduction to this and other Pod extracts added by the School's Assistant Associate Dean, Learning, Teaching and Student Experience which was circulated around the School on 23/06/2022.

The section below explains how I have reflected on the sessions.

4.8. Tutor reflections – Teaching Log

I have taken notes of each session in my Teaching Log of my plans, summaries of what I and students have said in main rooms during these meetings and reflected on these. I have organised this reflection adapted from the model created by Rolfe et al. (2001). Rolfe et al.'s model (2001) is based on three questions, which are: 'What?', 'So what?' and 'Now what?' used in reflections of students' professional learning and have created a table. Within this table, I have also considered four lenses of critical reflection in education as proposed by Brookfield (2017). These are: the students' eyes, colleagues' view' (as critical friends), my personal experiences and how these related to some pedagogical theories. Below is an example of one session from the table. Regarding my Teaching Log notes, I applied for and received ethics approval shortly before Group D started the sessions, therefore, I have only included my teaching notes relating to Group D of some of what was said in club sessions as a summary of these and my corresponding reflection.

Meeting 1 – Group D - 8/03/2022

Questions Based on Rolfe et al. (2001)	Further questions (based on Brookfield's 4 lenses, 2017)	Meeting details
What?		
	-were my aims?	Introduce & get to know each other Check students understand ethics for my study Introduce Active Empathic Listening (AEL) Talk & share a few online learning & active listening difficulties
	-was my initial plan?	- Follow same slides as previous group with the addition of adding - 'Celebrate Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Week' and say ''do it always, not only this week'' to 'Welcome to club-meeting 1 Introductions' slide with Nelson Mandela photo & quote -Introduce & get to know each other -Introduce myself & my study -Explain ethics & consent for my study -Explain club meetings plan -Introduce AEL- ask ss if they know & put in chat what they think -Practise AEL while talking about online learning & academic skills difficulties in breakout rooms

		-Recommend starting a club WhatsApp group -Mention EDI week + info as PDF (new) on final slide as follow-up conversations outside the club -Mention attendance certificates & - -Awards (as in intro session) -Mention next session's topic
	-did I do differently?	-Introductions went on for longer than expected so only had 5 mins (not 10) for breakout room to talk about online learning & academic skills difficulties -Briefly mentioned 'International women's Day' -Meeting ended approx. 7 mins late
	-did students do?	-All introduced themselves & interesting stories including one about working for Nelson Mandela (after seeing photo on slide & quote) and one about receiving an award for 10 years volunteering with St John's Ambulance from Princess Anne - All put ideas what AEL is in chat or mentioned them - A few students fed back about breakout room conversation (lack of time) to ask more
	-what did students say? (from notebook taken during session)	-Reasons for joining club were to improve academic writing Learn sg new (most) Meet people (most) Curiosity (1)

		Intro session helped (1)
		-Both old members said it helped academic writing, 'immense benefits'
		-AEL definitions provided by ss
		= motivational interviewing
		= feedback of listening
		= improves mutual understanding & trust
		=participatory non-judgemental listening
		=listening to a person & not being judgemental-show empathy & being mindful of body lang.
		=structured listening allows development of relationships with stronger understanding of what is being said
		-difficulties of online learning
		Breakout rooms
		New knowledge base
		Not meeting people
		All v. new
		Not meeting people
		Impact on academic side
		-difficulties of academic writing
		New
		'wrench'
		'struggle'
		-Also
		No opps. to meet people
		Couldn't make friends but better now

So what?		
	-have I learned from what I did?	- It was good to let students introduce & really talk about themselves even though it went on longer than expected and with previous groups (who had mainly talked about country of origin, previous studies & hobbies). This should be good for relationships.
	-have I learned from what I said?	-Asking students to paraphrase or say sg. about what ss said when introducing each other meant I did not have to call their names to ask them to speak much
	-have I learned from what students did?	-They were able to provide AEL definitions without any prompting- -appears that AEL and good relationships may be connected in quotes above -They returned to the main room having talked about what I had asked
	-have I learned from what students said?	- I learned sg. memorable about each member -ss learned sg. new abt. each other - interesting definitions of AEL to follow up in my reading
	-have I learned from theory?	- Reinforced importance of Asking about ss knowledge (of AEL) without previously explaining anything c.f. Brookfield (2017) challenging assumptions - Silence is golden! Let 'shy' and international ss speak cf.

		Akinbode (2015), Arunasalam (2016)
		-I remember learning about introducing each other as an 'icebreaker' in my first teaching course (CELTA) & had an interesting talk with a colleague before starting OACCs this year about telling students about one's own background too.
	Why does this matter?	-building good relationships with students is 'key' (Atkinson, 2020; Bovill; 2020) -Good to attempt this at start - The session made me feel good
Now what?		
	-is the impact on my learning?	- I need to follow up on my reading about AEL based on what students said
	-is the impact on my practice?	-Good to continue Asking ss what they think before giving my view or answers -These are MSc Yr 2 Nursing students, they learn about communication skills for their studies & practice, so compare with other students in different fields and levels in future (however, ethics consent from two Yr 3 law students who have been interviewed once & gave permission for narrated PP to be put on CAE website)

	-do I need to do to improve future outcomes?	- I wonder about the impact of having old members in the club? I am not sure of this yet since new students had already started introducing themselves before the new ones logged in a few mins late. They all had sg. to say about AEL

Table 4-1 Extract from Teaching Log of first club session

I consider these teaching notes further and in connection with my findings in the discussion section (See Chapter 9). For example, in relation to participants' reflections of how they communicated in the clubs and what I have learned from them.

5. Research design - Methodology

5.1. Outline

This chapter begins with an explanation of my understanding of the social world that unpins my research design and then describes Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an approach which informs my study. I subsequently explain some of the advantages and disadvantages of IPA related to analysing my Research Question about the lived experiences and perspectives of student participants who attended the online synchronous academic conversation club groups in which AEL skills were facilitated.

5.2. Methodology approach

5.2.1. Qualitative interpretative methodology

My study lies within a qualitative interpretative paradigm, which means I take the viewpoint, along with many practitioners in social sciences and education, that knowledge can be seen as the social reality of individual human experiences and social behaviour (Cohen et al., 2018). The knowledge gathered in relation to lived experiences relates to the context of the individuals between whom there is some kind of connection (Braun and Clarke, 2013), for example students who attended a club. In terms of data collection, a qualitative interpretative methodology considers words and their meanings. In other words, in a qualitative methodology, words are exciting to the researcher (Miles and Hubermann, 1994) and can reveal rich data. Although it is possible to generate numbers and patterns from qualitative data, qualitative research remains subjective (Cohen et al., 2018; Basit, 2010). Hence, in my study qualitative interpretative methodology implies my understanding and interpretations of what student participants said when interviewed about their experiences in the club groups they attended in early 2022.

Furthermore, an interpretative methodology can 'give voice' and attempt to understand the participant's social reality through the exploration of a particular phenomenon (Noon, 2018). In my study, I have attempted to convey and subsequently analyse the voices of student participants who attended the club

groups I facilitated and then interviewed. Qualitative interpretative methodology involves the study of one or more individuals' lived experiences of what appears from the data in relation to the Research Question (Smith et al., 2009). This is important to my topic, AEL in SGLCs in the clubs, where student participants were given the opportunity to talk about their learning experiences. In this case, findings relating to interview data of the experiences of some of the club members were then analysed and discussed.

5.2.2. Ontology

My ontological position, 'what it means to be human in the real world' (Jenkins et al., 2021:1), is social constructivist. Social constructivism emphasises human interaction (Seaman, 2021) within a given context and society (Jenkins et al, 2021). Since AEL has its roots in Vygotskian social constructivist learning theory, emphasising that communication is social (as explained in Chapter 3, Section 3.3), I take a social constructivist view. When considering my participants, MH Nursing students, it is important as a teacher to think of these students in their world and try to understand it, as Jenkins et al. (2021) explain. In relation to nursing students in their research, Jenkins et al. (2021) state that it is necessary to critically examine the personal situation of each student participant, considering aspects of the society and situations they find themselves in. For example, they mention consideration of the mass of information nurses are required to learn, practice placements and Covid-19. In addition, I would include cultural background and personal factors, which influence their lives as aspects of the nature of their social reality and how they explain they interacted as student Mental Health nurses in SGLCs in the clubs.

5.2.3. Epistemology

My epistemological perspective is that knowledge is socially co-constructed between the researcher and the participant. In her Doctorate of Education dissertation, Seaman (2021) considers how knowledge shifts as the researcher and participant engage in the research interview and within their frequently changing environments. This is in line with my social constructivist stance towards

AEL in SGLCs in OSL. I have explained my epistemological framework in the following table.

Participant	Gaps	Tutor/Researcher
Participating in online clubs		Facilitating online clubs
Explaining their lived experience of the clubs	-possible difficulties for the participant to fully explain their experiences	Attempt to understand the participant's meaning of the lived experience & empathising with them
Thinking about the meaning of their lived experience		Critically thinking about how well the participant's lived experience is understood
Critically thinking about their lived experience	-in tutor researcher understanding of participant	Critically thinking about what the participant's physical and social environment might be like
Participant's physical and social environment		Reflecting on own experiences and subjectivity

Table 5-1 Epistemological framework - merging viewpoints

Table 5-1 illustrates the participant's and researcher's merging viewpoints as they interact in the research interview in the co-construction of knowledge about the participant's lived experience of the clubs, in other words, how the knowledge shifts, according to Seaman's (2021) explanation above, as the tutor researcher and participant engage in the interview conversation. For the participant, having participated in the online clubs, they explain their lived experiences or aspects of them. Participants try to provide meaning to these experiences themselves or with the help of the researcher's questions, prompts and probes. This may allow the participants to think critically about these experiences, which lie within their physical and social environments (for example, online, university, background). The middle column in grey represents gaps in understanding as it is not possible for the researcher to completely understand the meaning of an experience that the participant explains.

It could be difficult for the participant to fully articulate their experiences. In other words, there might be gaps in mutual understanding for one or the other. The tutor researcher facilitated the online club and has therefore had a role in the

experience. This might place the tutor (and researcher) in a position of power, yet I have tried to minimise hegemonic assumptions (Brookfield, 2017) considered in my Reflective Journal (see Chapter 4, Section 4.8).

For example, I have attempted to employ AEL not only through facilitating the clubs but in the interviews as well. To understand the student's world, the tutor can actively listen and be influenced by the student's ideas and emotions, Bovill (2020:47). This may occur during the research interview through using AEL, such as Asking Open Questions and paraphrasing orally back to the participant to try to come as close as possible to the participant's meaning of the lived experience they describe, as I have tried to do. It may help to reduce my position of power, through the attempt to empathise with them while guiding the student participants.

In HE qualitative interpretative research, Edward Noon (2018), states that it is important for the researcher to empathise with the participant in the interview through active listening, mentioned in his description of his Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to qualitative research in HE.

IPA was conceived by Jonathan Smith in 1966 within health psychology and medical sociology research and has since also been used widely in other research areas including education (Smith, 1966; Noon, 2017; Noon 2018). Furthermore, IPA appears suitable to my epistemological framework above in that it should be possible to make sense of the participant's world 'through fruitful dialogue' Smith (1996:264). This should be possible within a communicative social constructivist paradigm.

5.2.4. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) – Background

According to Smith (1996), IPA is distinctive because of its 'duality' in how both the participant's (possible) perceptions and those of the researcher are discussed in the analysis, as well as the gap (explained in Table 5-1 in the above section) which might emerge. IPA involves examining the 'lived experience' of the participant in detail. The term lived experience comes from the German word 'Erlebnis', mentioned in Eatough and Smith's explanation of IPA related to phenomenology (2017). According to my understanding, lived experience refers

to what it means for a human to live through a particular experience. In addition, Erich Fromm (2010/1968) maintains that 'lived experience' has a philosophical meaning in that lived experiences are limited to how a person communicates their lived experience of, for example, music or love (or in my study participating in the OSL clubs). This is important to an IPA approach in research because IPA considers how lived experience is communicated by the participant to the researcher, where the researcher then explains that experience to readers of the research. I have found this duality important, especially given that qualitative research is subjective and much thought about what the participant means in a research interview is necessary.

Moreover, IPA is an in-depth exploration of the lived experience of one or more participant's being studied, which is related to a specific phenomenon. Phenomenon is a Greek word meaning the study of what comes to light (Smith, 2019), which in research is to reveal an insight into the participant's thoughts and feelings, which the participant reflects on and attempts to communicate with the researcher of the given phenomenon. Some examples of an IPA approach that relate to lived experiences in HE are: undergraduates coping with medical school (Shaw and Anderson, 2021), and barriers to the use of humour for HE lecturers (Noon, 2017). Such lived experiences may have occurred over a given period or started at a particular time that may continue into the future.

IPA is not only based on phenomenology but also on three core philosophies; phenomenology, hermeneutics (especially double hermeneutics) and ideography (Smith et al., 2009; Smith, 2011; Smith and Nizza, 2022). As a background to IPA, it is necessary to understand these.
The works of Husserl (1858 – 1938) and Heidegger (1889 – 1976) are considered the foundation of phenomenology. Husserl explains that phenomenology is 'the experiential content of consciousness' or going 'back to the things themselves' (cited in Smith, et al., 2009:12). What is important in phenomenology is the 'lived experience' of the participant (Eatough and Smith, 2017).
It is a phenomenological attitude, or reflexive account of how a person perceives the world. Husserl's 'phenomenological method' attempts to explain lived experiences that can be bracketed out, or treated separately as in mathematics, to explain perceptions, memories, judgements, thoughts and values (Smith et al.,

2009). Bracketing relates to IPA in that it is the researcher's process of reflecting on, interpreting, and discussing these. The idea of bracketing in IPA is important so that the researcher's thoughts can be separated from the data in the analysis process.

Yet, what exactly needs to be bracketed is unclear in Smith's work (Giorgi, 2011). I think that bracketing may be helpful for the researcher to attempt to render a qualitative study transparent and uncover bias, especially given that IPA and phenomenology are subjective.

Moreover,

> 'while Husserl was concerned to find the essence of experience, IPA has more modest ambition of attempting to capture particular experiences as experienced for particular people'
> (Smith, et al., 2009:16).

Understanding the essence or participants' live experiences is important, as Paley (2017), a phenomenologist, states, whereas an IPA approach aims to capture those experiences and analyse them in a series of stages (Smith et al., 2009; Noon, 2018).

Heidegger's philosophy focuses on 'the ontological questions of experience itself' based on his work 'Being and Time' published in 1927. In research, a participant talks about their lived experience from which the data collected is subsequently interpreted so the phenomena can subsequently emerge. In other words, '… all this is to engage with the phenomenon, the lived experience of the participants being investigated in the study' (Smith and Nizza, 2022).

Phenomenology refers to the nature of the experience of the participant's 'lifeworld' (Langdridge, 2007). Heidegger's work may be viewed 'through a hermeneutic lens' as well as a phenomenological one, in that phenomena can be explored in depth to uncover various meanings. According to Smith (2019) uncovering layers of meaning is important in IPA, as well as bracketing and reflexive analysis (Finlay and Gough, 2003 cited in Smith, 2009). Hermeneutics attempts to uncover multi-layers of meaning related to lived experience (Smith, 2019).

According to Smith et al. (2009), it is the 'hermeneutic circle' that can relate to the researcher's method in IPA. The hermeneutic circle works on several levels comparing the part to the whole. For example, they state, it is the single word from a particular sentence, the single extract from a complete text and the single episode in an entire life (Smith et al., 2009).

As I understand it, hermeneutics is about exploring meanings behind the experience and the researcher's attempt to interpret them. In addition, not only the participant's experience is examined but also the reflexivity of the researcher, known as the 'double-hermeneutic', which Smith et al. explain as:

> '… the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them' (Smith, et al., 2009:3).

Therefore, what is distinctive about IPA is that it does not only consider subjective individual interpretations but also the researcher's understanding of their meaning and reflexivity of both the participant and the researcher.

Ideography is concerned with the individual rather than the group. Each person's experience is unique to themselves. This view was proposed by the philosophical psychologist Harré (1927–2019) with a 'focus on the particular', as stated in Smith et al. (2009). In IPA ideography is used in single case studies or to compare a small number of cases in a study rather than making generalisations across participants' data (Noon, 2018). However, ideography on its own may be limited because an individual's experience is contained within relationships and the person's social world that is complex. I am not sure how close the researcher is able to get to the whole social experience of an individual participant. Yet, Smith (1996) does acknowledge the gap in understanding between the participant's meaning of the lived experience and the researcher's understanding or interpretation of it.

This leads me to reconsider my epistemological framework diagram (explained earlier in Table 5-1 in this chapter). I think the participant's and researcher's merging viewpoints are not a clear mirror but somewhat blurred due to some inevitable gaps that can occur in the researcher's understanding of participants.

The advantage of ideography, however, is that it may lead to a more in depth understanding of a person and how phenomena can be drawn from it and compared later. Braun and Clarke (2013) are critical of ideography because they consider it only possible to conduct an IPA analysis with very small samples of six or fewer participants. Nevertheless, Smith and Nizza (2022) state ten to twelve participants are acceptable in a doctoral study that adopts an IPA approach.

In IPA, ideography can be used together with a phenomenological and hermeneutic approach. In other words, a person may recount their subjective lived experience (phenomenology) that has many levels of meanings (hermeneutics) and is unique to that person (ideography). In IPA it is after analysing each individual account that comparisons can then be made across participants' data to see similarities and differences or where they converge or diverge (Nizza et al., 2021; Smith and Nizza, 2022).

> 'In a good IPA study, it should be possible to parse the account both for shared themes, and for the distinctive voices and variations of those themes. (Smith, et al. 2009:38).

Participants' voice is important in IPA (Noon, 2018), which can give them agency. For example, I tried to listen to participants in the club sessions and in the interviews in a non-judgemental manner. Nevertheless, there is unconscious bias because I was the clubs' tutor and the subjective nature of my qualitative IPA study.

It is possible that facilitating AEL provided club members, and in addition those club members who were interviewed, not only a platform for discussion but also the voice and opportunity to take action over their learning. In other words, in education agency can mean 'students' ability to regulate, control, and monitor their own learning' (Code, 2020). This could have been important for participants' agency in my study.

In summary of this section, a combination of phenomenology, hermeneutics, double-hermeneutics and an ideographic approach can contribute to an in-depth robust IPA analysis in interpretative research.

5.2.5. Research approach informed by IPA in this study

In my study, I employ an approach informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). I explore participants' lived experience of developing AEL skills in online synchronous SGLCs in the clubs (phenomenology) from both the individual participants' perspective by exploring their thoughts in a series of steps to uncover their meaning, as well as my own interpretations of what was said, which may be close or far from the participants' meanings (double hermeneutic). This is conducted by interpreting the data for each participant individually (ideographically) before comparing them together.

Smith (2019) suggests interpreting the data according to the following layers of meaning:

Type of question	Level of Analysis
1. What does *that* mean?	Literal
2. What does *he* mean?	Pragmatic/textual (puzzle)
3. What does it *mean*?	Experiential (significance)
4. What does it *mean* for my identity	Existential (significance)
5. What does my life *mean*?	Existential (purpose)

Table 5-2 Layers of meaning in IPA adapted from Smith (2019:168)

It is useful to think of different types of meaning to get a deeper understanding of the participant's experience, yet this approach appears to be a highly complex procedure, where the researcher might lose track of the point that the participant is trying to make. Indeed, Paley (2017) is critical of Smith's IPA work as being imprecise. Instead, Paley argues that analysis can be made on the basis of 'meaning attribution' by inferring the researcher's antecedent theory about the phenomena in question in the attempt to uncover new phenomena.

Paley's suggestion might also prove difficult because each participant's experience and social reality is likely to be unique. It might not be easy to relate the existing phenomena to the new. Nevertheless, interpretation of what the data may mean needs to be made by the researcher.

Noon (2018) states that an IPA approach can be used to illuminate the background of participant's lives in relation to the phenomenon, where significant aspects of participants' lives might otherwise be overlooked:

> '… a particularly useful methodology for researching individuals or groups of individuals whose voices may otherwise go unheard, such as online/distance learners, LGBT pupils and educators, or those who struggle with mental health disorders.' (Noon, 2018:80)

This is essential in an educational context, with respect to consideration of what Langdridge (2007) terms as a participant's 'lifeworld', and with respect to widening participation. Widening participation in HE refers to first-generation students, mature students, disabled students, single parents, and those from low-income and minority ethnic groups and other under-represented students and staff at an HE institution (Crosling et al., 2008, cited in Trotman on the BERA website 2023). Other under-represented students include care experienced and care leavers, estranged from family students, young adult carers and displaced (refugee) learners (University of Hertfordshire, 2024). Therefore, in IPA as Noon (2018) recommends, the researcher attempts to uncover those voices in an in-depth analysis.

IPA considers context and language analysis in participants' discourse and importantly includes discussion of the gap between the participant's and researcher's viewpoints. Noon (2018) explains a useful approach to adopting IPA using the following method adapted to his research in HE that is useful to explain the various steps involved in IPA based on Smith et al.'s suggestions (2009). The following is a summary of Noon's methods in various steps.

Step 1	
Interview question	Researcher notes
Transcript	

Step 2	
Researcher notes	Emergent themes

Step 3	
Themes	Quotes

Step 4	
Themes (identified in two or more transcripts)	

Table 5-3 IPA adapted from Noon (2008:77-79)

The first stage that Noon, based on Smith's work, adopts is known as 'noting' or 'initial comments'. This occurs during close readings of the interview transcripts. Possibly, it involves bracketing to consider the researcher's thoughts, assumptions and questions, although this is not explicit in either any of Noon's or Smith's work that I have read.

The next step is to examine these notes and create 'emergent themes' (known as 'coding' in thematic analysis and other qualitative approaches). These are words which summarise very short sections of the transcript (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Smith et al. (2009; 2021) create emergent themes line by line, which may make it difficult to grasp the gist or essence of what was said and is rather fragmented. Another approach I have found when I first attempted to create emergent themes with a small section of transcription, is to divide the text into segments rather than page numbers (explained in more detail in my analysis approach in Chapter 7).

In Noon's model (2018) above, emergent themes are subsequently considered and clustered into larger 'themes' (Smith et al., 2009). Finally, these themes are further grouped into 'superordinate themes'. The steps that Noon (2018) follows the approach by Smith et al. (2009). I have used the terms 'emerging themes', 'themes' and 'overarching themes' since starting my analysis in early 2022. (Smith and Nizza, 2022, have since renamed these themes calling them 'experiential statements', 'personal experiential themes' and 'grouped themes' respectively.)

What is significant about Smith and Noon's approach to analyse data from transcripts is that the initial stages are done ideographically on an individual participant basis before moving from the themes (or experiential statements) to the overarching themes (superordinate or grouped themes). It is only at the overarching theme stage that convergence and divergence between participants' statements can begin to be analysed. This differs from thematic analysis (TA),

which compares transcripts earlier in the process, thus TA is not ideographic (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Furthermore, the philosophical underpinnings in IPA, namely phenomenology and hermeneutics, do not feature in TA (Noon, 2018).

One similarity between IPA and TA is that both can be subjective and reflexive. 'Researcher subjectivity' may be conceptualised as bias in TA, a potential threat for coding reliability (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

In IPA bracketing may help to separate the researcher's thoughts in an attempt to render the analysis transparent. However, it is not clear to me at what point in the IPA analysis process bracketing should be applied or exactly how it is implemented in IPA. Likewise, Braun and Clarke (2021) do not explain precisely how reflexivity can be shown, although they maintain that a reflexive TA approach is possible.

5.2.6. Merits and limitations of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis related to the study of Active Empathic Listening

Noon (2018) lists the following advantages of IPA, which I have considered relating to my study and prospective participants.

1. IPA provides voice to diverse participants. I would agree because it allows them to discuss their experiences of class conversations and AEL in depth. Furthermore, inclusivity is important to me in my teaching and research; participants are Black African students at a UK university.
2. Open questions lead to responses in many directions. In my opinion, this can be an advantage to really explore participants' understanding of AEL, how they employ it in their conversations and reflect on it in the sessions and interviews.
3. Responses are subjective. Subjectivity is important in interpretative research, yet challenging for the researcher, as I have explained in the previous section.
4. Holistic exploration of participants' worlds. Again, this involves an in-depth study.
5. IPA is data rather than theory driven (Griffiths 2009 cited in Noon, 2018). I am likely to find a data driven methodology, in other words 'inductive approach', beneficial. There is such sparse literature about AEL in education that I have

not been able to form any theories yet. Also, individual experiences of AEL are likely to be unique.

Another merit of IPA is that it can allow 'multiple snapshots of experience' in 'individual lifeworlds' (Eatough and Smith, 2017:198). There may be some overlaps, gaps and spotlights in the data, which IPA may be able to illustrate at least to some extent.

Noon (2018) lists several disadvantages of IPA, which I discuss.

1. There can be a possible language barrier for the participants to explain their experiences. In addition, I need to be mindful of my interpretations, biases and ethical considerations, including any cultural misunderstandings. I need to consider whether English is students' first language and different varieties of English when considering participants' meaning. I use my Teaching Log to support IPA in my discussion. Employing my Teaching Log may provide some triangulation of my findings. However, it is a supplementary source rather than a method. This is because I was not present in the breakout rooms during student participant conversations and only noted some reflection during main room discussions for one of the club groups in the first part of the club, therefore I consider these notes as only a supplementary source. (explained in the ethics section 6.5.1 on p. 120).

2. There can be 'dualistic tension' between ideography and connections across participants, although IPA aims to avoid generalisations. I would agree that this tension could be problematic. It is necessary to state my rationale and thinking when making any choices about generalisations to render my study transparent.

3. IPA may give rise to 'sensitive and distressing experiences'. I agree because this could occur when participants are asked to talk about their feelings in certain situations. However, as participants will be discussing academic work in their conversations during learning sessions and subsequent interviews, sensitive and distressing experiences are unlikely to surface (as explained in the ethics section in the following Chapter 6 in Section 6.5.1).

Overall, IPA appears to be an effective method of analysis for my research because it should consider participants' thoughts and feelings about AEL in the club groups in considerable depth. Yet, it requires reflexive sensitivity and transparency by the researcher during the whole process.

The description in my data analysis approach Chapter 7, Section 7.2 provides a transparent overview of the stages.

5.3. My reflexivity considering Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Reflexivity is important in qualitative research, including in IPA (Braun and Clarke 2013; Smith, 2018). According to Eatough and Smith (2017), IPA is an 'experiential process' in an interpretative paradigm from the perspectives of each participant the researcher's reflexivity. Furthermore, as highlighted by Eatough and Smith (2017), IPA can be either 'empathic-descriptive' or 'critical-hermeneutic' in which the researcher shows empathy towards the participant or adopts a more critical stance. Noon (2018) maintains it is necessary to build a good rapport with participants, to which I definitely agree, therefore my approach is 'empathic descriptive'. In my study an empathic descriptive stance is important because I wish to show empathy towards the participants in my study during the interviews and empathy is important in AEL. It is difficult to be critical because my participants were my students.

I would attempt to be reflexive concerning the gap between each participant's perspectives and my interpretation of them, and then attempt to explain this gap to bracket my thoughts, questions and assumptions while keeping these transparent. In Chapter 7, I explain how I interpreted the data at each stage of the process. At each step, I reflect on what I did, my thoughts about the data and ask questions where I might be unsure of the participant's meaning or how to express my understanding of their meaning. This is part of my endeavour to make the overall process transparent.

When writing-up this chapter and reviewing the literature on IPA, I wrote the following extract in my Reflective Journal in relation to my learning and understanding of IPA.

17/08/2023
Initially, IPA seemed attractive as it allows the possibility to make notes and think about what each participant said. This was important as a tutor researcher in terms of bias and that I already knew the participants quite well, having facilitated the clubs, despite never having met any of them in person.
Nevertheless, on initial reading some of the literature on IPA, I found it quite confusing. For example, the overlap between phenomenology and hermeneutics and how these underpin the research process. It began to become clearer while actually doing the analysis and further during the writing-up process. Smith and associates more recent publications, (Nizza et al. 2021; Smith & Nizza, 2022) were helpful especially considering the writing-up of my analysis.
In addition, Eatough and Smith's chapter (2017) was helpful for me to realise that the term lived experience comes from German 'Erlebnis'. As I speak fluent German, the meaning became clearer. Indeed, as they state, lived experience is something that 'matters' to a person. Indeed, mattering is important as in Gravett's book (2023). Furthermore, presenting to and discussing my thoughts, ideas and questions with colleagues was helpful in an EdD session 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: How can it be made transparent?' (Fromm, 2023a).

Box 5-1 Reflective Journal 17/08/2023

This extract reflects some of my thinking in relation to my research approach informed by IPA and that I found IPA a challenging approach until I was actually in the process of analysing and subsequently writing up my findings.

5.4. Summary

IPA is a subjective interpretative approach to researching the lived experiences of a small number of participants in a particular situation, for example those involved in a specific university programme (Noon, 2017). It requires interpretation of the participant's meaning and the researcher attempting to make sense of it, hence double hermeneutic. Phenomenology tries to uncover that lived experience and what emerges from the data including bracketing; the attempt to separate researcher's judgements when interpreting the data. The research process is conducted in a series of stages through in-depth ideographic consideration of each participant that can include the researcher's reflexivity before comparing and

analysing the whole sample together, and then adding further reflections that emerge from the whole sample.

IPA attempts to illuminate the voices of individuals to explain what a given situation may be (or may have been) like for them. IPA is a complex approach, which is limited by the small number of participants in a study with some lack of clarity in the literature that I have read of how researcher's subjectivity might be revealed. Findings from tutor journals may provide more clarity regarding the subjective nature of my study that might triangulate with IPA, which I consider together in the Discussion chapter.

The following chapter, Chapter 6, describes the sample and ethical considerations in my study. Chapter 7 explains how I conducted my analysis informed by IPA.

6. Research design – Methods

6.1.   Outline

This chapter describes how I used semi-structured interviews in my IPA approach to this study, the questions and rationale for choosing these and a profile of participants. I explain my thoughts about research integrity, bias and transparency. Finally, I discuss my ethical considerations regarding my study and the approval procedure.

6.2.   Semi-structured interviews

As suggested by Smith and Osborn (2015) and Noon (2018), I employed semi-structured style interviews as my main data collection method, which is often employed in IPA and are a frequent choice in qualitative research (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This method of interviewing allowed me to ask participants questions in a conversational style interview to put them at ease, which started with a very open question: 'What has your experience of the online academic conversation clubs been like?'.

Semi-structured interviews offer flexibility in IPA and allow 'the researcher and participant to engage in dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in the light of participants' responses' (Smith and Osborn, 2015:29). This means the researcher can prepare an interview guide of possible questions, prompts and probes, which allow the researcher to go into depth where appropriate, and without necessarily adhering to the order of questions (Smith, et al., 2009; Braun and Clarke, 2013). An example of a prompt in my interviews was, 'What can you say about breakout rooms?' and a probe was 'What do you mean by 'inner circle''? One concern I had was that the participants would answer in a way that might please me, that would be biased, therefore one probe was, 'Are you saying this to please me, what can you say is negative about the club?'

I spent time over writing the questions, prompts and probes and checked them a week later, especially making sure that there were no leading questions. For example, I did not include AEL in the questions but did prompt and/or probe further when participants mentioned it of their own accord, or aspects relating to

AEL, such as OP. I also asked my supervisors and a colleague for their opinions in relation to the wording of the questions I had prepared.

Interview technique was practised in an EdD study session, where I learnt that I could employ some AEL skills during the interviews to show that I was listening to participants with attention and to ask further questions for more clarity and depth. It is interesting that Braun and Clarke (2013) and Noon (2018) suggest the use of 'empathic questioning' in semi-structured interviews in IPA. They explain that it is helpful to listen to the participants empathically to empower them (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Furthermore, an empathic interview stance and pilot practice are significant because they

> 'can develop cultural competence, as well as empathetic insight into participants' perspectives, thus enabling them to refine and strengthen their main study' (Whiting et al., 2021).

Through development of cultural competence, the researcher may be able to glean a more holistic view of the participant (Noon, 2018) and their lifeworld.

During the interviews, I tried to put participants at ease and having facilitated the clubs already knew them well. I explained that they did not have to answer any questions they did not wish at any part of the interview (see ethics section below for more details). Before each interview began, I explained that participants should think of the interview as a 'conversation' and that there were no right or wrong answers, which Smith et al. (2009) also advise.

6.3.   Interview questions

In the first section of the interview, I asked questions to complete a participant profile, as below. I decided it would be less time-consuming for the participants than to send a questionnaire. It also allowed me to show an interest in them.
I could then try to take a 'holistic' view from the beginning of these conversations (Noon, 2018) and in the subsequent analysis. For example, I took an interest in the languages they speak and their previous education. This was important as all participants are of West African ethnicity. This section was also conducted in a conversational style, while I filled in a form for each participant.

Participant profile form		
Participant name & number		

Personal information

Age:	Gender:	Nationality:

Other optional information about yourself you would like to include:

Languages

    Languages spoken with your family

    Which language/s do you speak with your family?

    For each language including English:
- State frequency (e.g. mainly, sometimes, occasionally, never).
- State level of understanding (e.g. fluent, good, intermediate, basic)
- State level of speaking (e.g. fluent, good, intermediate, basic)
- State level of writing (e.g. academic, excellent, good, intermediate, basic, never learned)

    Languages spoken in your education

    Which language/s did you speak/were lessons conducted in at primary school?

    Which language/s did you speak/were lessons conducted in at secondary school?

    Which language/s did you speak/ were lessons conducted in during your further education- post age 16?

    Best languages

    Which language/s do you consider you understand best?

    Which language/s do you consider you speak best?

    Which language/s do you consider you write best?

    Any other information about your languages you would like to include?

Education

Country/s of previous education

Form 6-1 Personal information and background

Smith et al. (2009) suggest that questions in IPA should be phrased as openly as possible to avoid assumptions. Thus, for the first interview, I only prepared six

questions and several prompts and probes to allow the possibility for participants to talk so that each could take the conversation in different directions.

Following the profile section above, the main section consisted of the following questions, prompts and probes to use or adapt if necessary.

Interview Questions (first interview)

1. What has your experience of the online academic conversation clubs been like?

   Prompt:
   easy/difficult
   Covid-19
   feelings towards others in group
   your identity/background
   role in the club

2. What has learning in online synchronous communication been like for you since you started your course during the Covid-19 pandemic in general?

   Prompt:
   Online sessions where you have the possibility to communicate/interact with others (synchronous communication)
   Covid-19
   Learning online in general during sessions
   Contact with others
   Technology
   Easy/difficult

3. How has this experience been similar or different this year from when you first started your course (in autumn 2020)?

   Prompt:
   Challenges
   Improvements
   learning outcomes
   contact with other students

---

4. What have you learned from the clubs?

   Prompt:

   in class/outside

   your nursing studies

   online learning approach

   breakout rooms/main room

5. What are your feelings towards your learning from the clubs?

   Prompt:

   communication with others

   your nursing studies,

   before starting the clubs & now

   breakout rooms/main rooms

   the teaching (honestly!)

6a. What can you say about your participation in the clubs?

6b. … in other learning sessions online?

   Prompt:

   engagement

   listening

   speaking

   other skills

   any changes in your participation/engagement?

Probes:

Interesting

Can you tell me some more about that?

In other words?

Explain?

Can you provide an example?

Why?

Thanks. Are you saying that to please me? Anything that wasn't so good?

My reflexivity/additional notes

Form 6-2 First interview questions

The interviews took place on Zoom and were recorded, which provided a transcript. I took some notes as I was interviewing, especially pauses, laughs and emphasised words, in case these were not evident in the recording or transcript.

Unlike in conversation analysis, in IPA Smith and Osborn (2015) state it is not usual to note non-verbal language but do not explain why. Importantly, I chose to have videos off during the recordings because some participants were on placement in hospitals in small staff areas where there was a possibility that another person could have walked in at any time and others were at home where a child may have entered the room. However, they do state it is important to note pauses, laughs and false starts and keep a Reflexive Notebook of any analytic comments. Therefore, I made some notes in my reflexive journal while listening either during the interviews or when listening to the recordings, such as, 'spoke in a confident and enthusiastic tone'. These notes helped me to consider the points that a participant made and their tone, as well as allowing me to be reflexive about what the participant was saying. This was difficult in that I wanted to listen attentively, so I was possibly not consistent in my notetaking as I was engrossed in what the participant was saying. However, the recordings afforded the possibility to listen again later and make further notes in my Reflexive Notebook.

The second interview questions were as follows:

2nd Interview questions

1. In the second part of the club, you attended (the revision session and the session/s about the Pod)– What was your experience of those meetings like?

    Prompts/probes:
    Examples
    Why?

2. Reflecting on both parts of the club now, what would you say about your skills development (if at all)?

    Prompts/probes:
    AEL
    Examples
    Why?

---

3. We talked about your participation in the club and other online learning sessions in the first interview, what would you say or clarify about your confidence in online conversations in a group?

   Prompts/probes:
   Before/during/after attending the club/1st part/2nd part
   Examples
   Why?

4. Looking back over both parts, how do you feel about the club?
   Prompts:
   Anything else?

Form 6-3 Second interview questions

The timing of the first interviews varied between 40 minutes to one hour 10 minutes, which included a brief chat, checking I had received the signed ethics consent, thanking for that and their time, and asking questions for the profile form.

The second interview was much shorter, about 20 minutes, due to the participants' very busy schedules at the time and that there were only two sessions of two hours in the second part of the club. The focus of the questions was on the second part of the club and their overall learning. I included Question 3 about confidence (in the second interview), which I had felt could have been elaborated on in the first interview. Although it appears like a leading question, I referred to what had been said by those and other students in the first interview.

6.4.   Sampling

Smith et al. (2009) state that in IPA sampling should be homogeneous within a qualitative paradigm. Consistent with the ideographic nature of IPA, samples of one to ten respondents are usual (Smith et al., 2009; Smith and Nizza, 2022). Of the ten respondents who were interviewed, all had attended in the clubs (n=10). As mentioned in the introduction, all students in the club, whether interviewed or not, were in their 2nd (final) year of the Pre-registration MSc Mental Health Nursing at the same university in England. I excluded any student from the interview

invitation, who had attended the club fewer than four times, which I had explained in the introductory talk before the clubs started. Nevertheless, all students who attended the clubs regardless of how many times or whether they were interviewed had played a role in the club and received a certificate of attendance to acknowledge their contribution.

Of those students who attended fewer than four times, four were African, three were White British, and one was European. One student participant from the Middle East, who had attended the club four times, did not reply to the email invitation.

The following table represents a profile of each participant interviewed according to their age, gender, nationality and other categories.

Participant	C1	C2	C3	C4	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6	Totals
Age	37	34	49	42	44	37	31	61	56	55	31-61
Gender	M	F	F	M	F	F	F	M	F	M	4M, 6F
Nationality	Nig	Nig	Brit	Nig	Ghan	Nig	Nig	Nig	Nig	Nig	8 Nig, 1 Brit, 1 Ghan
Spoken lang. with family	Igbo	Etsa	Eng	Eng Igbo Pidgin	Ga	Yor Eng	Igbo Eng	Yor Ijebu Eng	Eng	Eng Yor	2 only Eng 6 Eng & African 3 Afric
Best spoken lang.	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Ga Eng	Eng	Eng	Yor Ijebu	Eng	Eng Yor	7 Eng 2 Eng & African 1 Afric
Best written lang.	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Eng	Yor	Eng	Eng	9 Eng 1 Yor
Country of previous education	Nig	Nig	Nig	Nig	Ghan	Nig	Nig	Nig	Nig	Nig	9 Nig 1 Ghana
Arrival in UK	yrs ago	2020	yrs ago	yrs ago	yrs ago	2020	2020	yrs ago	yrs ago	yrs ago	3 new in UK in 2020

Participant	C1	C2	C3	C4	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6	Totals
											7 many years ago
Also Attended 2nd Part	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	5
Attended club in 2021	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	2

(Abbreviations: Nig=Nigerian, Ghan=Ghanaian, Etsa=Etsako, Yor=Yoruba, Afric=African)

Table 6-1 Participant Profiles Online Academic Conversation Club 2022

All students listed in the above table attended the Part 1 one-hour sessions of the club. The MSc Mental Health Nursing 2nd year programme was divided into two groups (which I call Group C and Group D) that followed different placement schedules. Hence, when one group was in university the other was on placement in hospitals or community healthcare. Three participants arrived in the UK for the first time in September 2020, whereas the other participants interviewed had been living in England for many years prior to starting their MSc MHN studies. Two participants participated in the club in the previous year (2020 – 2021) and insisted on continuing in their second year (2021 - 2022). Club meetings for Group C participants took place from 12 January to 9 February 2022 and for Group D from 16 February to 16 March 2022 with individual interviews between 21 March and 14 April 2022.

As the club was open to any student in the second year of the MSc MHN Programme, it was by chance that all ten participants who attended the first part of the club - four or more times out of five sessions and were interviewed were Nigerian or Ghanaian. One of the ten, one stated she was British but had been entirely previously educated in Africa, like the other nine. Of note, password protected university records state that in 2021 – 2022 80% of the second-year students on the MSc Mental Health programme were Black or Black British. All participants interviewed in my study were aged over 30 (n=10). Of the whole programme cohort, 77% were over 30. 60% of the participants were female, which is in line with the cohort in which 62% were female. None of the participants declared a disability or other demographic details when asked if they wanted to

share any other personal details. 8% of students on the programme cohort had declared a disability. In general, the demographics of the sample reflect those of the whole MHN Programme that year, especially relating to skin colour (Nigerian and Ghanaian) and gender. Statistics of the students' nationalities on the MHN Programme was not available.

Of these ten participants, five were available to continue to the second part of the club of two two-hour sessions from 18 to 26 May 2022. The five students were interviewed individually between 13 and 22 June 2022. Therefore, all then were interviewed after Part 1 and the five continuing student participants were interviewed a second time after Part 2.

6.5.   Research Integrity, Bias and Transparency

The UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Website (2023) states

> 'Research carried out with a high level of integrity upholds values of honesty, rigour, transparency and open communication, as well as care and respect for those involved …'

As the sole tutor and researcher of this study, I was concerned throughout my study about my position and bias. It is impossible to completely eliminate bias in interviews (Basit, 2010). In education, Basit (2010) states that it may not be good practice to ask participants to review transcripts because the data belongs to the researcher rather than the participants. I disagree with Basit and decided it was important to check that the transcriptions were correct according to what they wanted to say in the interviews and that participants were still in agreement to be included (see ethics section below). Nevertheless, none replied when I sent them their individual transcripts.

An inductive approach was also important to me to see what emerged from the data. In creating my data analysis sheets, I was mindful of possible misinterpretation. Therefore, the noting column was a way of bracketing but showing my thoughts rather than hiding them in an attempt to keep analyses transparent. Keeping a Reflective Journal and Reflexive Notebook, quoting from these may also help show some transparency.

6.5.1. Ethical considerations

Mindful consideration regarding ethics is extremely important in research (Seaman, 2021). Indeed, in educational research sensitivity is important when gaining access to the participants, choosing methods and how to interview the participants, collecting, analysing, writing and disseminating the data to 'preserve the dignity of the participants, and not to harm or hurt them' (Basit, 2010).

In gaining access to participants, I needed to patiently consider colleagues and their busy schedules when asking for agreement, access to students and finding out students' potential availability. Initially, I had consulted colleagues about their valued opinions on and personal knowledge of their student groups regarding which groups would most likely benefit from participating in the clubs (for example, suggested cohorts, international and/or home students). Obtaining this information from colleagues across Schools and departments took several months and many discussions with them towards both my pilot and main study each year.

Furthermore, I gave much consideration to the students themselves to avoid stress in relation to whether they attended learning sessions or not and asked for their opinions of when it might be best to meet.

The British Educational Research Authority (BERA) guidelines state:

> 'Individuals should be treated fairly, sensitively, and with dignity and freedom from prejudice, in recognition of both their rights and of differences arising from age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, nationality, cultural identity, partnership status, faith, disability, political belief or any other significant characteristic.' (BERA, 2018:6)

I considered my identity and background in relation to the participants' identity in planning teaching, materials, teaching sessions, interviews and my writing. This I needed to approach sensitively as I did not want to say or include anything to cause upset. I was aware of being a White British tutor teaching in club groups of mainly Black students of African ethnicity in the interviews and of my position as a tutor researcher.

During the period of my study, appalling inequality and injustices in society were reported, for example the murder of George Floyd by police in May 2020 (Crump and Rand, 2020) and that Black individuals are '9.7 times more likely than white

people to be stopped and searched' by police in the UK (Shutti et al., 2020). I am aware of awarding gaps between Black and White students in HE (Closing the Gap Report, 2019; de Sousa et al., 2021). This reinforces my commitment to learning together and intercultural conversation regardless of a student's background or orientation. I agree with Koutselini (2017) that intercultural conversation can improve relationships and understanding through learning from and with each other and compassion. Nevertheless, I need to approach my teaching and research towards all participants with sensitivity and compassion too.

Regarding quotes from data, analysis, writing and dissemination, I took care to exclude any point that might identify the participant. I also considered those club members' identities who attended the club but were not interviewed when writing my text to avoid revealing who they were to readers and causing harm.
For example, in relation to those members not interviewed, I did not specify country of origin but only stated the continent because for some individuals there may have only been a very small number of students or only one from that country on the programme.

I also thought about what club members said in sessions. For example, two spoke about famous people they had met, which I carefully worded when including an extract from my Teaching Log in my write-up. This is despite an engaging conversation that ensued when members were getting to know each other in the first club session. In addition, I tried to avoid making assumptions about any individual or the experiences they conveyed. Summarising their meaning on the data sheets and the ideographic summaries (explained in Chapter 7, Section 7.2) took sensitive consideration and can help to render findings transparent.

I was careful in creating teaching materials (MS PowerPoint slides) and in my teaching approach to consider students' background and opinions. For example, the inclusion of Black role models and our discussion about this (as explained in Chapter 4, Slide 4-3). Therefore, I considered participants' identities, in my teaching and research approach. When facilitating the clubs, I was reflexive in my materials and my relationship with them as a tutor researcher.

My Teaching Log written during or shortly after teaching sessions was important here too because I could reflect further on issues concerning Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.

6.5.2. Ethics approval

I first applied for ethics approval to the relevant participating university ethics committee on 19th October 2020. This included a completed application form, participant information form and consent form for consenting participants to complete and sign, which I shared through the University's password protected cloud.

Approval was subsequently granted (Protocol Number cEDU/PGR/UH/04811) and later I applied for an amendment to change the title (Protocol Number acEDU/PGR/UH/04811(1). A further amendment was granted on 18th February 2022 (Protocol Number acEDU/PGR/UH/04811(2)) because I applied to include my notes from teaching sessions of what club members said. In accordance with this I added a hyperlink to the first slide in a session asking for students to consent, which I read out in the session. Appendix 6-9 list relevant documents. As in my application, approval was granted for me to conduct my study online only.

Slide 6-1 Ethics statement

In addition, I applied for and received the kind permission by email (with my principal supervisor copied in) from nursing programme heads for the initial and amended ethics applications, as well as from the programme heads in the Business School and Centre of Academic English for my 2021 pilot study. Due to socialising restrictions because of Covid-19, interviews were carried out online (as well as all the teaching) and in accordance with ethics applications on human participants at the time.

I paid particular attention to explaining to consenting participants and other club members that students could attend the club whether or not they consented to being interviewed for my study. Thus, as explained above in the sampling section, I facilitated the club groups for more students than I interviewed. The initial Protocol certificate asked for clarification with my principal supervisor regarding the wording of this point, which was duly acknowledged. To avoid harm, I also explained that consenting or not to the interviews had no bearing on their academic work as this was for my research, and those who did consent did not have to attend the interviews or answer any questions they did not wish to. I explained that participants should view the interviews as a conversation.

Furthermore, the questions were about participants' experiences in the club and were unlikely to bring up anything distressing.

6.6.   Summary

I have considered how I conducted semi-structured interviews in depth and compiled a set of possible questions, prompts and probes for both interviews. Interview questions were kept open to allow participants to talk freely as in a conversation. Sampling was homogenous regarding attendance in the club and that all participants were aged over thirty, on the same programme and of West African origin. I have been concerned about bias in teaching in the clubs and my study. Therefore, I tried to consider methods to reduce bias, such as revealing sections from my Teaching Log and Reflexive Notes and the noting column on the data analysis sheets but understand that qualitative research is inherently subjective. Finally, I have explained my ethical considerations and the ethics approval procedure.

7. Data analysis approach

7.1. Outline

My analysis approach is organised according to ten stages with several steps within each stage, which I describe in this chapter. These are informed mainly by the work of Jonathan Smith and associates and Edward Noon on IPA; for example, Smith et al. (2009), Smith and Osborn (2015), Nizza et al. (2021), Smith and Nizza (2022) and Noon (2018).

7.2. Implementation

The table below illustrates an overview of the stages and steps I have taken to analyse the data.

1 Checking transcripts
Checking transcript accuracy against recordings
Researcher's engagement with data
Adding segment numbers to data
2 Creating data analysis sheets
Creating initial sheet for 1st participant
Creating subsequent participants' analysis sheets
Layout of analysis sheets
3 Data analysis sheet column 1- Participant meaning
Summary of participant meaning
4 Data analysis sheet column 2 - Noting
Researcher's notes
Reflexivity
Bracketing
5 Data analysis sheet column 3- Possible emerging themes (PETs)
Naming PETs
PETs for Interviews 1 & 2
6 Data sheet column 4- Segment keys & frequencies
Creating spread sheets & charts
Calculating frequencies of occurrences
Locating segment keys
7 Writing ideographic summaries
Writing ideographic summaries for each participant
8 Reducing emerging themes to themes
Rearranging PET clusters on new spreadsheet
Creating possible themes
Creating themes
9 Reducing themes to overarching themes (OTs)
Considering frequencies of occurrences
Creating final OTs
Creating table of emerging themes, themes and OTs
10 Writing group summaries from ideographic summaries
Writing summaries for Part 1 (Groups C & D) & Part 2 Group

Table 7-1 Data analysis: stages and summary of steps and workflow

7.2.1. Checking transcripts

I checked the transcripts generated via Zoom while listening to the recordings many times. Automated Zoom transcriptions, although helpful to an extent, require considerable human input (Harrison and Hernandez, 2022). I needed to check the transcriptions word by word against the recordings for accuracy. In my experience, this was only slightly quicker than listening and typing verbatim. Nevertheless, it was helpful that Zoom provides both recordings and transcriptions that can be saved, and transcriptions can easily be resaved to an editable format.

It was important to initially check the transcripts within a few days of the interview for general clarity and recheck several times for accuracy. Although time-consuming, this process allowed me to fully engage with the data, which Nizza et al. (2021) and Noon (2018) maintain is important in an IPA approach to data analysis. Qualitative software was not employed in my study.

Meanwhile, I added additional thoughts to my Reflective Notes while checking and amending the transcripts, for example:

31.03.2022.
- *Zoom generated transcripts can differ from what can be heard when replaying recordings e.g., 'It wasn't just Disneyland lecturers' on original transcript- recording can be heard as- 'It wasn't just additional lectures'.*
- *I inserted […] where words and phrases were unclear and [laughs] to the transcripts. Words that were particularly stressed were italicised.*
- *I included back channelling utterances e.g., 'um'- (Kuhn, et al. 2018).*
- *I added at the top of each transcript, notes such as, 'appeared to speak confidently' and 'spoke very fast'.*

Box 7-1 Reflective Journal entry

It was after checking the transcripts, that I sent the transcripts to the respective participants for verification, but as mentioned in the previous chapter none replied.

The next step was adding segment numbers to the transcripts. I felt that the data would be too fragmented to analyse line by line, as in Smith's various work (Smith et a., 2009; Smith and Nizza, 2022) or difficult to find again later if page numbers are used, as Noon (2018) suggests.

A new segment number was added at the beginning of each segment, where there was any kind of interruption such as, when I asked a question, added a prompt, probe or uttered words, for example, 'interesting', 'okay', 'yes', and 'mmm'. I then printed the checked transcripts to subsequently analyse the data.

7.2.2. Creating data analysis sheets

On starting my approach to the data analysis, I decided to handwrite my descriptions in pencil on A3 size paper. These sheets could easily be amended and reviewed throughout the analysis procedure. Furthermore, I thought it would be easier to have the data analysis sheets on paper because the transcripts seemed too long to be in a column and thus easier for me to manage and frequently reread. (see Appendix 3 for finalised version for one participant and Appendix 1 for corresponding transcript). Therefore, I laid the printed transcripts next to my handwritten data analysis (DA) sheets to work through systematically. The initial format consisted of four columns on the sheets.

For the first participant to be analysed, C2, I called the columns 'Summarised Possible Participant Meaning', 'Noting', 'Possible Emerging Themes' and 'Segment Key' as shown below:

Possible Participant Meaning	Noting	Possible Emerging Themes	Segment Key

Table 7-2 Layout of data analysis sheets

I have arranged my DA sheets differently from those suggested by Smith et al. (2009) and Noon (2018) in that my transcripts are on separate sheets from the DA on an A3-size notepad. The segment keys (interview number, participant code and segment numbers) are added to a column respectively rather than line numbers, which Smith et al. (2009) and Smith and Nizza (2022) employ, or alternatively page numbers as explained in Noon's (2018) article. In my initial attempts of my DA, I had found it too fragmented and difficult to analyse the data line by line but not easy to find quotes by looking through whole pages. Therefore, I found it was better to use segment numbers. Of note, my approach is informed by IPA in that I have found an analysis process that seemed would be workable

for me. My approach informed by IPA allows me to consider each segment in the transcript and simultaneously work through my analysis on the data analysis sheets in depth.

7.2.3. Data sheet column-participant meaning

Smith (2019) emphasises that there are several layers of meaning in an utterance, which is important in an IPA approach to the data analysis procedure. Here Smith (2019) explains that these layers of meaning include literal and experiential meanings (how it was experienced), as well as emotive language, which is often expressed metaphorically involving visual and other senses (Shinebourne and Smith, 2010).

The first column on my DA sheets, 'Possible Participant's Meaning' is important to the idea of layers of meaning and double-hermeneutic interpretation in IPA. This is the researcher's understanding of the participant's lived experience (Smith et al., 2009). In other words, it entails the researcher's view of the meaning of the data 'through sustained engagement with the text and a process of interpretation' (Smith and Osborn, 2015:39). Therefore, I went through the transcript segment by segment explaining my understanding of the participant's meaning. I use the word 'possible' because it is my interpretation of what was said and reflects what I consider to be a summary of participant's meaning.

Once I had completed the DA sheets for the first participant (chosen to analyse at random), I reviewed my approach. I realised that some of my descriptions relating to 'possible participant meaning' were too long and time-consuming for me to continue in the same level of detail as for the first participant, so I changed this column name to 'Summary of Possible Participant's Meaning' for subsequent participants. I then continued by summarising what participants said within each segment in turn.

7.2.4. Data sheet column- Noting

The second column, 'noting', allowed me to consider what each participant had uttered on a deeper level, as well as to keep the analysis transparent for the reader. As Noon (2018) explains, the researcher can question and note these

referring to what the participant might have meant, possibly allowing to further consider the participant's experience and meaning, where the researcher deems this to be appropriate.

Below is an example from my DA sheets related to a segment of the first participant's transcript.

Possible Participant Meaning	Noting	Possible Emerging Themes	Segment Key
Tried to get reassurance from another Black colleague, who acknowledged showing care for others in this way - both the supervisor and colleague used the term 'culture shock'.	*Choosing to talk to a Black colleague who was understanding- sought reassurance - compassion. Maybe reassurance and compassion were more important to her than being identified or perceived as a Black person (related to previous point she made that she said that being Black was not important)? Or maybe being Black was important to the participant?*	*(Assigned in next step)*	*1-C2-106*

Table 7-3 Extract from data analysis sheets

Sometimes my questions in the noting section considered the context of a longer section of data, especially where a participant tells a story of a lived experience, such as in the example above where the participant explains about having been misunderstood by a white supervisor but where a Black colleague had appeared to be 'understanding'. I also asked questions in the noting column where I was unclear of the participants' meaning, especially where the point that the participant was making seemed to be a sensitive issue, such as in the above example related to cultural misunderstanding or skin colour.

While noting, I often checked my Reflexive Notebook taken during the interviews themselves or had added points to when listening to the recordings again later, for example:

> *08.08.2022. Earlier in the interview- said not concerned with how others perceive her as a Black person- later talked about culture shock and showing compassion to a supervisor who had been ill. (Cf. Gilbert-compassion).*

Box 7-2 Reflexive Notebook

The noting column is useful for bracketing during the analysis stage of IPA. Firstly, bracketing ideas keeps thoughts about one participant separate from what other participants said. This, I think, corresponds with ideographic or individual analytical approach in IPA. Secondly, bracketing can help to separate the researcher's thoughts from what the participant may mean (Smith et al., 2009). My stance here is that while it is important to separate the researcher's thoughts, I prefer to reveal my thoughts in the noting column to render my work transparent. In other words, I question the participant's meaning (for example, in the noting column in Table 7-3 above) and include these questions, but separately, rather than bracket them out or omitting them.

Sometimes I did not actually insert a bracket in the noting column, but the point is that my noting column is separate from the 'possible participant meaning column'. This differs from Smith and associates' illustrated examples of IPA (Smith et al., 2009; Nizza, et al., 2021; Smith and Nizza, 2022), where noting and meaning are in the same column on their analysis sheets. Referring to Noon's data analysis process (2018) in Chapter 5.2.5, Noon does keep his notes in a separate place from the meaning sheets on different sets of pages. In other words, my approach seems to be similar to Noon's description of how the data analysis process IPA works (2018), however, I have presented mine differently on the analysis sheets as I found it easier to have the analysis columns on the same set of pages rather than separate sets of pages (see example in Appendix 3). My approach emphasises the point I made that my data analysis approach is informed by IPA, in that it does not follow Smith's illustrations exactly.

7.2.5. Data sheet column- Possible emerging themes

The third column on my data analysis sheets shows my 'possible emerging themes'. These are, 'concise phrases which aim to capture the essential quality of what was found in the text' (Smith and Osborn (2015:41). Where necessary, I explained my choices of 'possible emerging themes' in my noting as there sometimes appeared to be an overlap of emerging themes so they were not always easy to assign to a single possible emerging theme.

For example:

Possible summary of Participant Meaning	Noting	Possible Emerging Themes Cluster	Segment Key
'Communication is wide' which is important and informs judgement. Communication skills learnt in the club helped to gain enough confidence to ask to do a presentation during a placement.	*Benefits of good communication. Better communication skills – seems to improve confidence.* *Relates to both oral comm. benefits (11) and confidence (18) - mainly about oral comm. so assign to that.*	*11- Oral Communi-cation benefits*	*1-C3-055*

Table 7-4 Example of noting to assign possible emerging themes to a cluster

From the first participant's data I analysed, I found that I had 93 'possible emerging themes'. To reduce the number to be more manageable, I compiled a list of these and then clustered them together. This was organised by highlighting frequently occurring terms from the list of 93 possible emerging themes and then grouping these terms into clusters.

For example, 'Oral communication benefits' became a cluster rather than many separate benefits such as, 'oral communication boosts confidence'. In other words, I subsequently used these 'possible emerging theme clusters' as an initial framework. Smith et al. (2009) call this clustering process, 'abstraction', that involves matching similar ideas together. I changed the corresponding column title

on the DA sheets to 'Possible Emerging Theme Cluster Number/Name (PETC No./Name)' for analysing the data of the other nine participants.

For example:

Possible Participant Meaning	Noting	Possible Emerging Theme Clusters	Segment Key
Benefitted from small number of students in club…	*Might relate to shyness/ confidence PETC or participation/ engagement, hence several PETCs may apply. I have chosen the shyness/confidence PETC which may reflect the essence of what the participant means.*	*Shyness/ confidence*	*1-C3-032*

Table 7-5 Data analysis extract - noting related to possible emerging themes

Once I had organised my possible emerging themes into clusters, analysing the data on the handwritten sheets was then easier and quicker to assign.

Initially, there were 28 possible emerging theme clusters (PETCs) listed for Interview 1, which are listed in the table below.

General experiences of being in club	OP - Benefits	Studying online- Benefits
Relationships with others in the club	OP - How it works	Studying online- General
Reasons to join club	OP- Difficulties	Studying online- Difficulties
Teaching of club sessions	Listening - Benefits	Studying online- Cameras on/off
Experiences of Year 1 & Year 2 as club member compared	Listening - How it works	Academic skills-Critical analysis/critical thinking
1st time studying in UK	Listening- Difficulties	Academic skills - General
Study experiences on MSc Mental Health Programme	Oral communication/ conversation- Benefits	Participation/Engagement
Covid impacts	Oral communication/ conversation- General	Shyness/Confidence
Possibly not relevant to club or MSc Programme	Oral communication/ conversation- Difficulties	Participant's motivation to learn
Identity		

Table 7-6 List of Possible emerging theme clusters after Interview 1

Of note, one PETC was unique to two participants only in that these two attended the club in the previous year, 'Experiences of Year 1 & 2 as club member compared'. I felt it important to highlight this because these two participants experiences in the club in the second year may have differed from those participants who were new to the clubs.

Noon (2018) states that themes with weak evidence can be excluded. In addition, Noon (2018) excludes those themes that have not been mentioned by more than two participants. However, since I found the only PETCs arising from the data in Interview 1 related to two participants only, which were 'listening difficulties', 'OP difficulties' and 'oral communication/conversation difficulties', I decided to keep these because I felt it important to discuss these difficulties in my subsequent

analysis because these PETCs would be useful to considering limitations in facilitating AEL skills.

After Interview 2, I added two additional PETCs, which were 'Planning & recording Podcast in Part 2' and 'Reflecting on whole club experience after Part 2'. Thus, there were 30 PETs at this stage.

7.2.6. Data analysis sheet column- segment keys & frequencies of occurrences

The final column of the analysis sheets, Segment Key, for example, 'frequency of possible emerging theme clusters' (PETCs) was used to create spreadsheets and statistical charts. Each segment key is unique to the interview number, participant number and segment on the transcripts. One advantage of the segment keys was to list them together with the PETC names and numbers on a spreadsheet to calculate the number of occurrences in each interview and then overall.

From these lists I could establish the frequencies of occurrences for each PET cluster and create subsequent charts. I then reviewed the PETCs and eliminated one only, which was 'Possibly not relevant to club or MSc Mental Health Nursing Programme'. There were only two occurrences of this PET in Interview 1 and none in Interview 2. As the two occurrences were vague, I eliminated the PETC from the list. This meant there were 29 overall PETCs. This allowed me to establish a finalised list of emerging themes without the word 'possible' shown in the table below.

Finalised emerging theme clusters		
General experiences of being in club	OP - Benefits	Studying online- Benefits
Relationships with others in the club	OP - How it works	Studying online- General
Reasons to join club	OP- Difficulties	Studying online- Difficulties
Teaching of club sessions	Listening - Benefits	Studying online- Cameras on/off
Experiences of Year 1 & Year 2 as club member compared	Listening - How it works	Academic skills- Critical analysis/ critical thinking
1st time studying in UK	Listening- Difficulties	Academic skills - General
Study experiences on MSc Mental Health Programme	Oral communication / conversation- Benefits	Participation- Engagement
Covid impacts	Oral communication / conversation- General	Shyness- Confidence
Identity	Oral communication / conversation- Difficulties	Participant's motivation to learn
Planning & recording Podcast in Part 2	Reflecting on whole club experience after Part 2	

Table 7-7 List of finalised emerging theme clusters & assignment to themes

Another advantage of creating these segment keys was that I could easily locate the segments and corresponding data on the spreadsheet for quoting when writing up my findings.

7.2.7. Creating ideographic summaries

The aim of creating ideographic summaries was for me to have an overview of each participant's lived experience in the clubs that emerged from such a detailed data analysis process. To create ideographic summaries, after revising each data sheet for each participant, I wrote a summary of the main points mentioned considering what the participant emphasised in one or two paragraphs.

Creating these ideographic summaries was an iterative process of looking at the keys, summaries of participant meaning columns and noting, also where necessary, returning to the transcripts to understand the essence of what each participant said. For me, this is where Husserl's phenomenology (mentioned in Chapter 5, Section 5.2.4), ideography and double hermeneutic interpretation in IPA merge in that these summaries allowed consideration of the meaning of the lived experience to see the main points or overall essence each participant made. Understanding the essence of each participant's interview is important in IPA before considering the next. (See Chapter 5, Section 5.2, and Appendix 3 for examples.) The point about essence concurs with Paley (2017), whose work on phenomenology maintains that the consideration of essences is important in a phenomenological approach. My consideration of what these ideographic summaries or essences mean is important to hermeneutic interpretation in IPA. In other words, I have attempted to combine the lived experience and the interpretation of what that may mean together for each individual participant.

7.2.8. Reducing emerging themes to themes

Next, I considered reducing the emerging themes to 'Possible Themes' on a subsequent spreadsheet. Adding colour for each similar type of emerging theme cluster helped me to divide the emerging themes into possible themes on the spreadsheet. For example, the emerging themes below could be combined into the possible theme named 'Oral Paraphrasing'.

Once reviewed, including rearranging a few of the PET clusters within them, these were hence named 'themes' (see Appendix 3 for complete spreadsheet of themes). I thus reduced the 29 emerging theme clusters into ten themes. In addition, I grouped the PETCs 'Participation/Engagement', 'Shyness/Confidence', 'Participant's motivation to learn' and 'Identity' into one theme which I named 'Personal learner factors'. Hence, the ten themes were:

Finalised themes	Assigned OT
T_1: General experiences in the club	OT_1
T_2: Oral Paraphrasing	OT_2
T_3: Listening	OT_2
T_4: Oral communication/conversation	OT_2
T_5: Studying online	OT_3
T_6: Covid impacts	OT_3
T_7: Academic skills & MSc MHN Prog.	OT_4
T_8: Personal learner factors	OT_5
T_9: Identity & 1st time learning in the UK	OT_5
T:10: Relationships in the club	OT_6

Table 7-8 List of 10 themes and assignment to overarching themes

7.2.9. Reducing themes to overarching themes

By looking at the 'themes' spreadsheet, I finally reduced these themes further into six 'overarching themes' (OTs) which were:

Finalised overarching themes (OT)
OT_1: General experiences in the club
OT_2: Active Empathic Listening
OT_3: Studying online & Covid impacts
OT_4: Academic Skills & MSc MHN Programme
OT_5: Personal learner factors
OT_6: Relationships in the club

Table 7-9 List of 6 overarching themes

(See Appendix 2 for spreadsheets of themes and overarching themes).

To determine the OTs, considering the frequencies of the initial emerging themes was helpful. For example, 'Relationships in the club' occurred for every participant many times in the data so I assigned this to a separate OT. In addition, I was aware that there was some convergence in the data regarding Listening, Oral Paraphrasing and Oral communication/conversation so I grouped these into the Active Empathic Listening OT, and because Studying Online and Covid Impacts also converged in places, the corresponding OTs was named 'Studying Online & Covid impacts'.

The following table shows the stages of theming together.

Finalised emerging theme clusters		
General experiences of being in club	OP - Benefits	Studying online- Benefits
Relationships with others in the club	OP - How it works	Studying online- General
Reasons to join club	OP- Difficulties	Studying online- Difficulties
Teaching of club sessions	Listening - Benefits	Studying online- Cameras on/off
Experiences of Year 1 & Year 2 as club member compared	Listening - How it works	Academic skills- Critical analysis/ critical thinking
1st time studying in UK	Listening- Difficulties	Academic skills - General
Study experiences on MSc Mental Health Programme	Oral communication/conversation- Benefits	Participation- Engagement
Covid impacts	Oral communication/conversation- General	Shyness-Confidence
Identity	Oral communication/conversation- Difficulties	Participant's motivation to learn
Planning & recording Podcast in Part 2	Reflecting on whole club experience after Part 2	

Themes	
General experiences in the club	Covid impacts
Oral Paraphrasing	Academic skills & MSc MHN Programme
Listening	Personal learner factors
Oral communication/conversation	Identity & 1st time learning in the UK
Studying online	Relationships in the club

Overarching themes
1. General experiences in the club
2. Active Empathic Listening
3. Studying online & Covid impacts
4. Academic Skills & MSc MHN Programme
5. Personal learner factors
6. Relationships in the club

Table 7-10 Combined table of theming process

Findings from emerging themes, themes and overarching themes are considered in the next chapter (Chapter 8, 8.1 Findings). Jonathan Smith's work (Smith et al., 2009) and (Smith and Nizza, 2022) together with Edward Noon's work (2018) on IPA informs my use of theming. Possibly, naming themes in my work may have some similarity to Noon's explanation of how IPA emerge because Noon's research is also related to HE.

7.2.10.   Completing group summaries

After reviewing all the data sheets and theming process and completing the ideographic summaries, I completed my group summaries. It was only after creating the data sheets for all the participants in Interview 1 that I reviewed the ideographic summaries together and created a summary for all participants in Group C and Group D respectively. The same procedure was repeated for Interview 2, where there was only one group of some participants from Group C and D. My aim of writing the group summaries was to provide a summary of my detailed approach informed by IPA to attempt to arrive at a conclusion regarding the lived experiences of the student participants in the club in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns. Finally, the ideographic summaries and group summaries were useful in my attempt to render my analysis transparent.

7.3.   Reflexivity

In this chapter, my reflexivity with respect to participant data can be seen from my engagement with the transcripts, data analysis sheets (especially the noting column, ideographic and group summaries. Initially, I wrote the ideographic and group summaries for myself because of the many pages of data analysis sheets I had and then realised they were helpful to create an overview of participant data. I have attempted to consider the student participants in my study with sensitivity and rigour. Indeed, Etherington (2004) explains that the collaborative relationship between the researcher and participants should be reflexive. This is important to my study as both a teacher and a researcher. My study concerns student participants who I have taught and have developed a relationship with over time. That relationship is dynamic and reflexive (Etherington, 2004), which influences my interpretation.

7.4.   Summary

My data analysis approach was informed by IPA in that I was able to develop a procedure to enable in-depth consideration of what participants said in the semi-structured interviews. This procedure differs from Smith and Noon's work because I have chosen to analyse the data in segments corresponding to the interview transcripts for each participant (rather than line by line) and have laid out the theming differently on the DA sheets. Thus, I have organised my interpretation of the summarised meaning of the data, my noting, emerging theme clusters and segment keys in columns on my DA sheets while working through each segment for each participant in the transcripts.

The emerging themes were reduced into themes and finally into six overarching themes. Keys relating to interview, participant and segment numbers were added to spreadsheets to create a chart for each interview. I interpreted the data ideographically, which was compared with other participants within and across themes later. In addition, I wrote ideographic summaries after compiling the data analysis sheets for each participant. Further analysis was achieved during the write-up stage explained in the next chapter and Discussion chapter.

My analysis approach is informed by IPA in that my adaptation of bracketing my noting in separated column on the DA sheets, compiling ideographic summaries and interpreting these may differ from other approaches that adopt IPA, such as those described by Smith and Noon. I consider IPA to be a reflexive approach that is likely to show some transparency to my interpretation of the lived experiences of AEL for participating students in the online club in 2021-2022, especially shown through using the noting column on my analysis sheets and ideographic summaries. Adopting an IPA informed approach to the two data sets (one for each interview) and considering the ideographic summaries, as well as some consideration of findings from tutor journals as an additional data source (mentioned in Chapter 5, Section 5.2) may help to render my findings trustworthy and transparent. A transparent analytical approach is likely to contribute to rigour in qualitative studies (Cohen et al., 2018).

8. Findings from participant interviews informed by an IPA approach

8.1. Findings - Overview

As explained in the Data Analysis Approach, Chapter 7.2, after completing the clustering for the emerging themes clustering on the Excel sheets for each interview, I created themes and finally overarching themes. To provide an overview of my findings, I have included a bar chart below to illustrate the data in the initial clustering of possible emerging themes for Interview 1 according to relative frequency. The relative frequency is the percentage of occurrences. The relative percentage is expressed as being between zero and one.
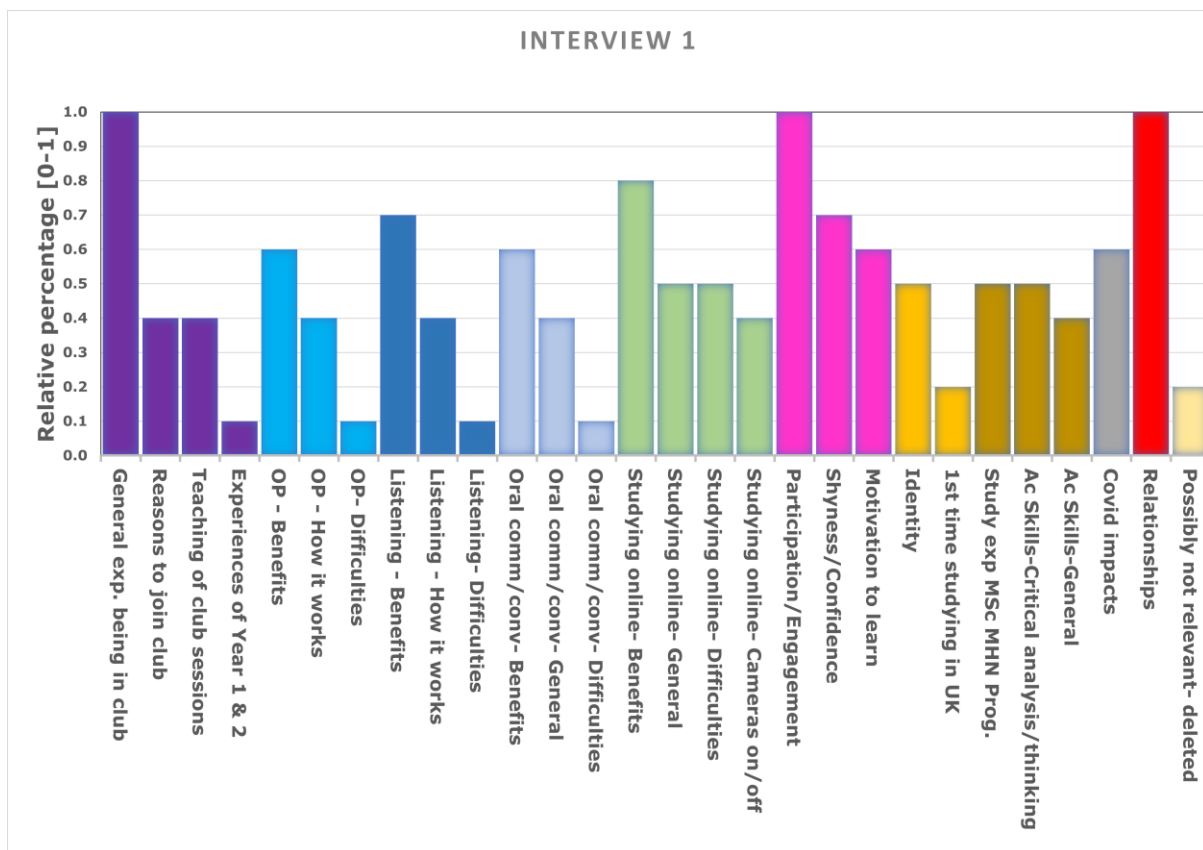

Figure 8-1 General summary - Interview 1- Grouped by possible emerging theme cluster

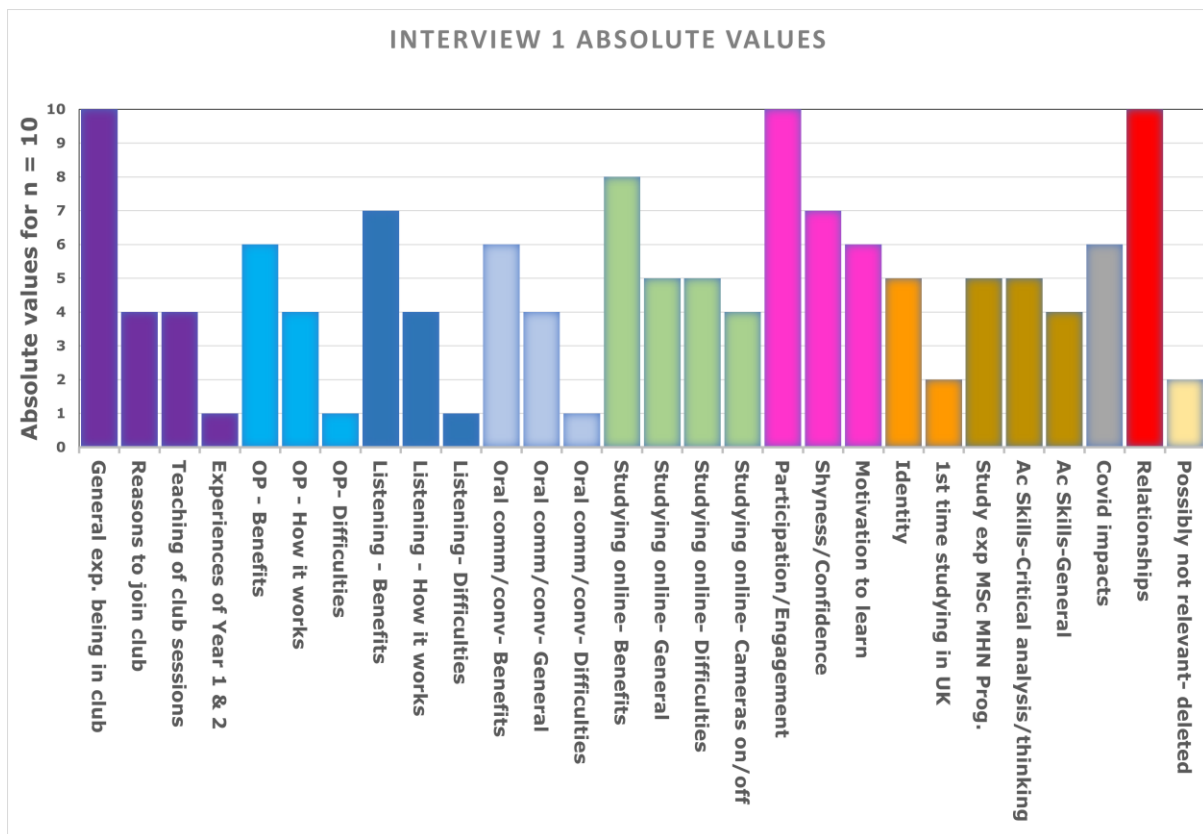A further bar chart illustrates the same data in absolute values.

Figure 8-2 General summary - Interview 1- Grouped by possible emerging theme cluster – absolute values for n = 10 participants

Importantly, the values in the charts only represent the occurrences but do not represent positive, neutral or negative attitudes of the participants. For example, the three 'how it works' bars may represent benefits too but possibly not exclusively. It is in the closer readings of the analysis that provide further details.

Each possible emerging theme cluster is grouped into themes to which I have assigned different colours. For example, as there was convergence in meaning between the 'Listening', 'OP' and 'Oral Communication/ Conversation' emerging themes I have chosen different shades of blue to represent the AEL skills, Oral Paraphrasing and Listening with Attention, which were sometimes expressed generally by participants as 'Oral Communication' or 'Conversation' and often both OP and LwA were mentioned in the same segment. There is no category for Asking Open Questions, part of my AEL conceptual model, because Asking OQs was not discussed until the second part of the club. Other examples of colours assigned include themes relating are, for example, represented in purple relating to four general emerging themes about the club and in green relating to four emerging themes.

Of note, all ten participants mentioned their 'General experiences in the club', an emerging theme, which was later grouped into an overall 'General experiences in the club' theme with three other similar emerging themes. All participants also mentioned 'Participation and/or Engagement' and 'Relationships' (to other students) in the club groups. 'Benefits' and 'How each AEL skill works' appear to outweigh 'Difficulties' with these skills. Nevertheless, it is in the details relating to participants' quotes explained in the subsequent sections of this chapter for each overarching theme that a clearer understanding of participants' lived experiences in the clubs can be revealed.

The bar chart below illustrates the possible emerging theme clusters for Part 2 the club, which was discussed in Interview 2, a shorter semi-structured interview than Interview 1, and illustrated using the same colours as the chart above for Interview 1. Interview 2 represents the five participants in Part 2 who had all attended Part 1 (n=5).
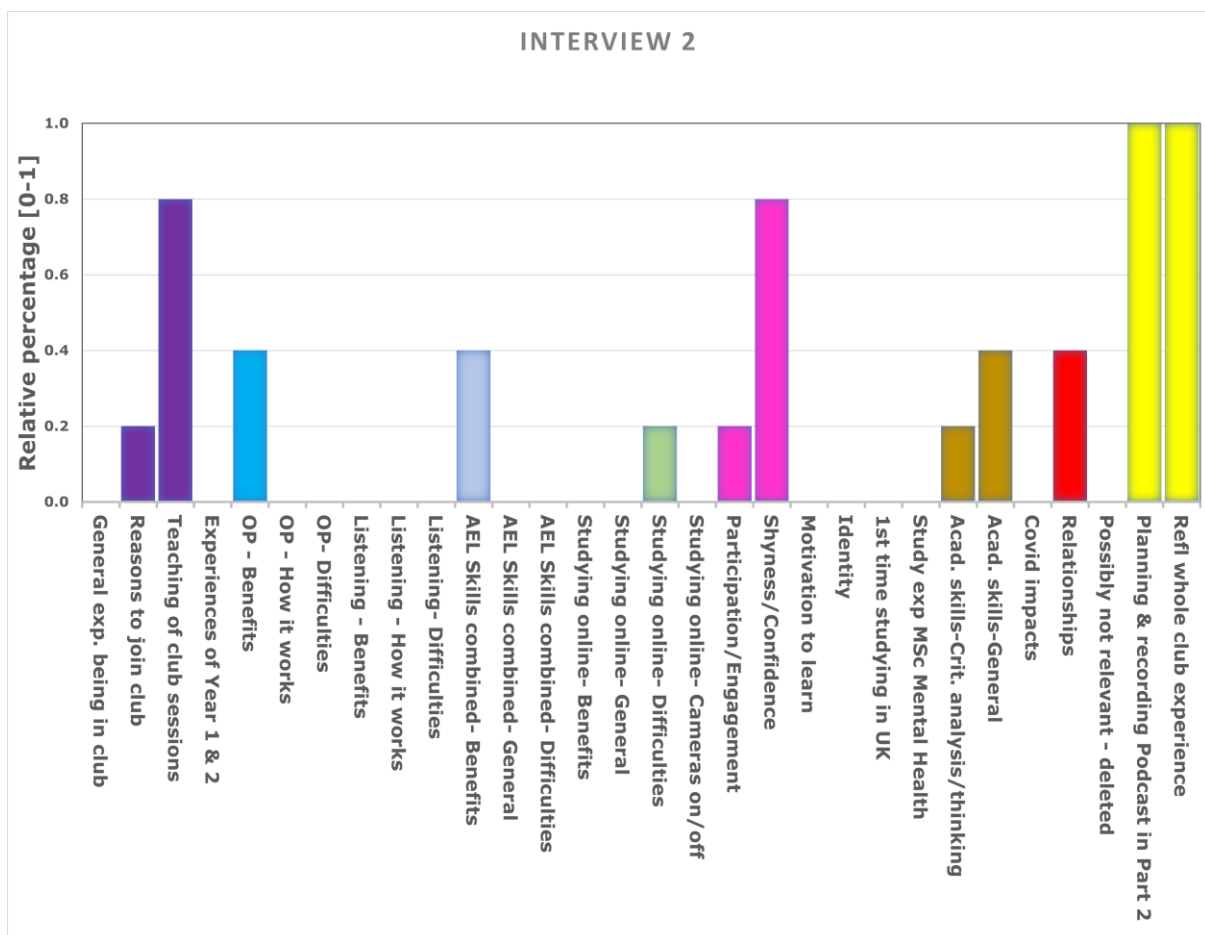

Figure 8-3 General summary - Interview 2- Grouped by possible emerging theme cluster
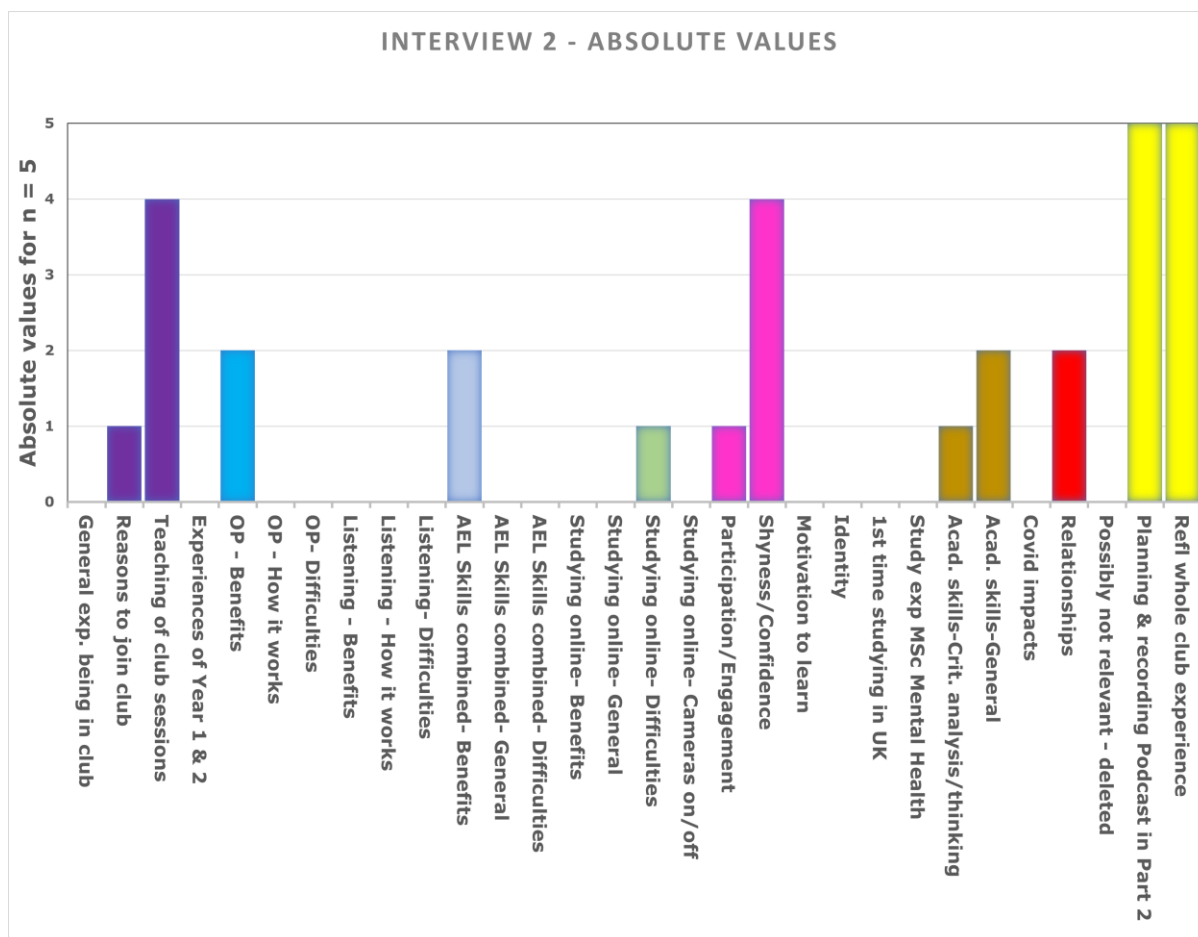
Figure 8-4 General summary - Interview 2- Grouped by possible emerging theme cluster – absolute values for n = 5 participants

In Interview 2, 'Teaching of club sessions', 'Shyness/Confidence', 'Motivation' and the two emerging themes 'Planning & recording the Podcast' and 'Reflection on both parts of the club overall' show the largest relative percentage of occurrences. There are fewer bars in Interview 2 than in Interview 1 because of the interview questions being focused on two sessions in Part 2 only and a brief overview of the whole club learning experience. One question was asked to clarify points about confidence in Interview 1.

It is important to note that only three participants were new arrivals in the UK (of which only one attended Part 2). Also, 'Experiences of Year 1 & 2' relate only to the two club members who joined the club again in 2022 (the year of this study), included within the General experiences theme, and both these student participants attended Parts 1 and 2, which they mentioned in Interview 2. 'Possibly not relevant' relates to two participants in Interview 1, where their

meaning was unclear and did not seem to be relevant to the club or the MSc Mental Health Nursing Programme, and did not have an occurrence in Interview 2, so as mentioned in Chapter 7, Section 7.2.6 this theme was later omitted. As for Interview 1, the bar chart for Interview 2 provides a general visual overview; however, it is in the detailed analysis of the quotes, explained in the rest of this chapter, which provide a deeper insight into the possible participants' meanings of their lived experiences in the club.

Two further bar charts are included below to illustrate male and female relative frequencies in Interview 1.
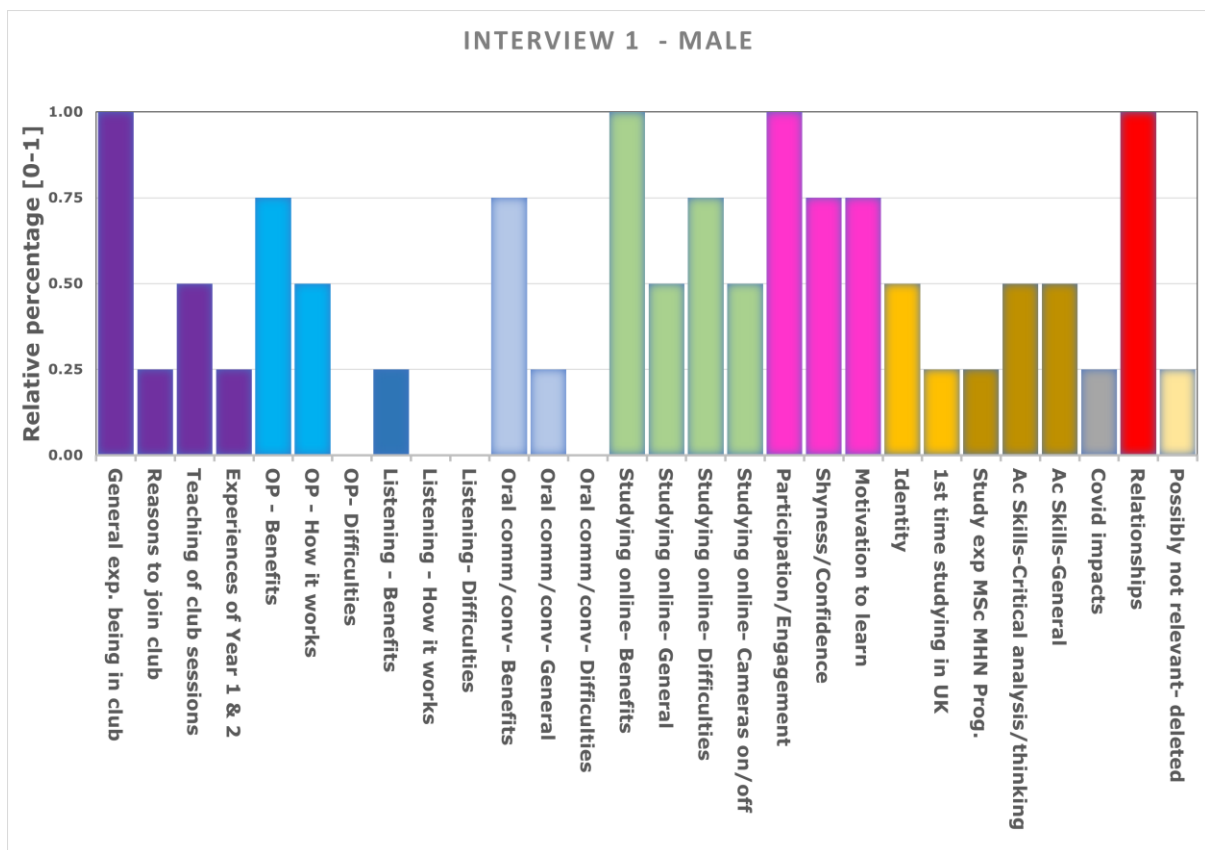

Figure 8-5 General summary - Interview 1- Grouped by possible emerging theme cluster – data for 4 male participants
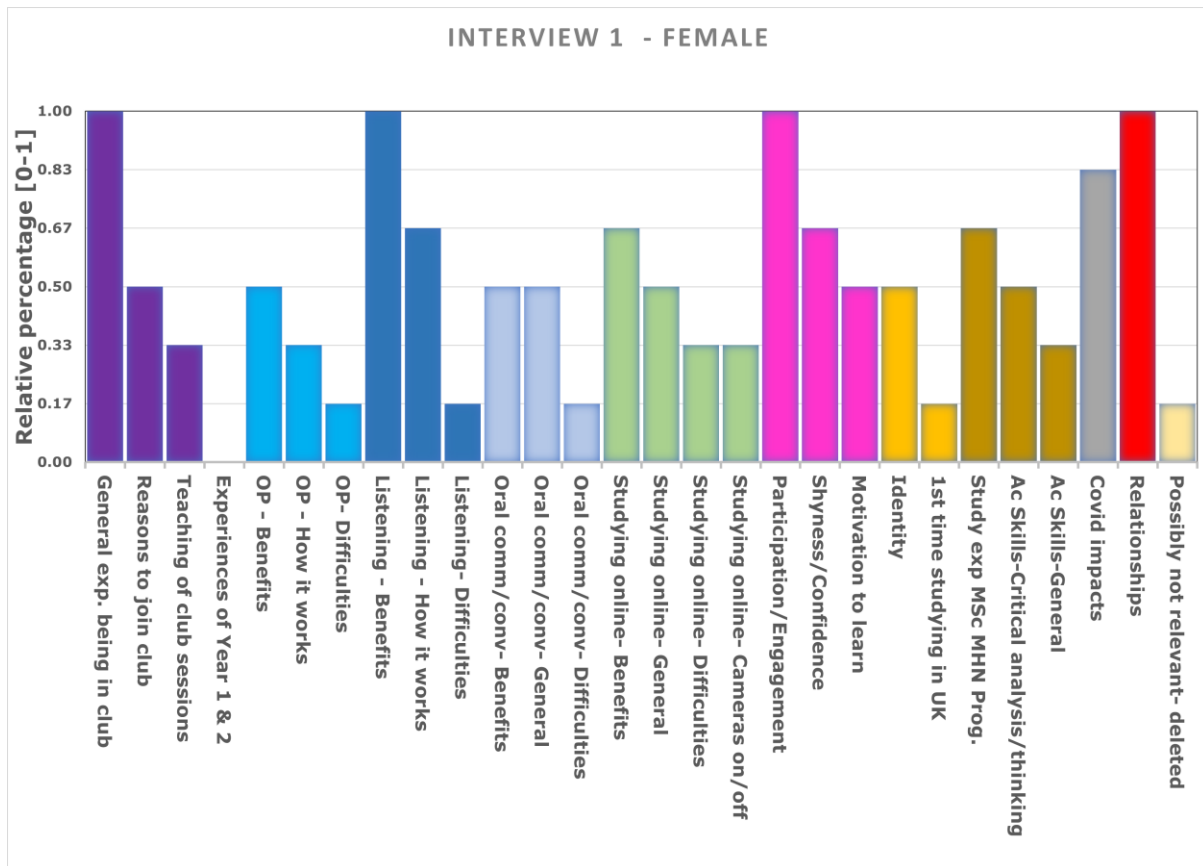
Figure 8-6 General summary - Interview 1- Grouped by possible emerging theme cluster – data for 6 female participants

There were four male and six female participants in Part 1 interviewed. This means that the number of participants is rather low and the data seems difficult to interpret.

Nevertheless,

- Three emerging themes show 100%, 'General experiences in the club', 'Participation and engagement', and 'Relationships'
- 'Listening-Benefits' show 100% in female data and 'Studying online-Benefits' shows 100% in male data.
- Identity seems to be similar in overall and Male/Female charts
- OP in the overall chart shows the highest percentage for the three OP bars,
- OP how it works is the second highest bar for this group
- OP, listening and oral communication difficulties are only mentioned once by a female student only.

- All male students mention, 'Studying online Benefits' as do 2/3 of female students, where the overall percentage is 80%.
- Other aspects of 'Studying online (General, Difficulties and Camera on/off)' seem to be nearly equally distributed in male, female and overall.
- The distribution in the following group comprising Participation/Engagement, Shyness/Confidence and 'Motivation to learn', seem to be equal with Participation/Engagement reaching 100% in all charts.
- Also, the group with 'Identity', '1st time study in UK' seem to have a very similar distribution in all charts.
- The group of 'Academic skills' shows negligible differences only
- Interestingly the Covid impacts show significant differences. 60% overall split up to 25% male and 80% female.

The following sections of this analysis chapter are organised into the six overarching themes (OTs) and analyse these in relation to quotes, my DA sheets and extracts of my journals (Reflective Journal, Teaching Log and Reflexive Notebook) to further explain my interpretation of each participant's meaning in the data sets for each interview.

These are:
1. General Experiences in the Club
2. Active Empathic Listening (AEL)
3. Online Learning & Covid-19 Impacts
4. Academic Skills & Learning on the MHN Programme
5. Personal Learner Factors
6. Relationships with others in the Club.

8.1.1. Overarching Theme 1 – General experiences in the club

General experiences of the club is the overarching theme (OT) that relates to participants' initial responses of how they experienced Part 1 (Interview 1), reasons for joining the club (Interview 1), the teaching in the club (both interviews), general experiences of the revision and Podcast sessions in Part 2

(Interview 2) and a reflection of how those five participants described their experiences about the club after both parts (Interview 2).

Each of these aspects were initially separate emerging themes that were clustered into themes and then into the General experiences in the club OT. One reason I chose this OT was because it was difficult to assign segments (and even lines) in the data into emerging themes in the first instance because of considerable convergence in the data.

For example, one participant spoke about relationships in the club and learning communication skills in one line.

> '… I am able to relate more with my peers and I have learnt more as well about communication…' (1-C4-004)

It was from further questions and probes, as I tried to listen attentively, that participants elaborated on what they initially said about their experiences that helped me cluster the data.

Interview 1

The general experiences overarching theme highlights participants' experiences in the club that each expressed when asked the first question 'starting generally, what has your experience of the online academic conversation club been like?'.
All ten participants responded to this question. The first line of each response showed that attending the club was a positive experience for them all and provided an introduction.

> Emeke: 'One word would be fantastic.' (1-C1-002)

> Adaora: 'My experience has been wonderful, it has taught me a lot.' (1-D3-002)

Here Emeke's and Adaora's use of adjectives 'fantastic' and 'wonderful' are clear that they benefitted from attending the club, which are explained in more detail in this and the other OTs. Sam, Diamond and Karen state that that they learned from the club.

> Sam: 'Um it was a good experience because there are so many things I didn't understand [before the club].' (1-D6-002).

Diamond: 'I'd say it was interesting, I wanted to participate, I learned especially about paraphrasing …' (1-C2-002).

Karen: 'It's been okay it's been quite um [pause] educating.' (1-D5-002)

For Sam the learning experience was 'good'; for Diamond it was 'interesting', especially because of the Oral Paraphrasing she learned. This is significant in that Oral Paraphrasing explored within the AEL OT, explained further in the next section, was a focus of the teaching and featured in all sessions. In addition, stating she wanted to participate indicates motivation and that it was 'interesting' may imply that she was engaged in the club.

Karen was possibly less enthusiastic in that she stated it was 'okay'. Yet, later in the interview she mentions 'it was just the timing …' (1-D5-015), where she explains it would have been better if the club had run in the previous semester. In addition, Olivia and Isaac felt they would have benefitted more if the club had been held earlier in their course, nevertheless the club appears to have been helpful.

Olivia: 'Um if the club had been introduced earlier it would have benefitted *me* a lot although it helped.' (1-C3-002)

Isaac: 'Um I wish I had known about the club earlier than I did.' (1-D4-002)

At the beginning of the interview, Seye, Juliet and Yasmine claimed they had benefitted from the club in terms of good relationships between club members.

Seye: 'The experience has been good as I am able to relate more to my peers.' (1-C3-002)

Juliet: 'Yeah it's been very good because I got the chance to relate a bit more with my other colleagues.' (1-D1-002)

Yasmine: '… Yes the academic conversation clubs brought me closer to some of my colleagues …' (1-D2-002)

Given that the students had had difficulties meeting each other due to the pandemic and other time constraints, positive relationships were important in this

context, as well as most probably to the success of the club. Data relating to the OT 'Relationships in the club' are revealed and analysed in Section 8.1.6 of this chapter.

Comparing the opening statements of all participants together, it appears that eight students were very positive about the club and two, Olivia and Karen, were quite positive in that they would have preferred the club to have been held earlier in their studies.

It is important that I refer to my noting on the analysis sheets and journal here, since I wonder about how much of what participants were saying was to please me as I was their tutor for the clubs. The noting section on my analysis sheets may help to make my attempt to understand participants' meaning transparent and enables me to reflect more deeply about what participants have expressed in the interviews. For example, the section of a transcript and the corresponding section on my DA sheet below illustrate this, followed be a section from my Reflexive Notebook.

---

001 AF: …. So I'll start with the first question if that's okay [Yasmine]. Yeah, thank you erm **what has your experience of the online academic conversation clubs been like?** So okay, [Yasmine].

    002 D2: Okay, let me see. Well, I really enjoy erm erm connecting with people. Yes, the academic conversation club has brought me *closer* to some of my colleagues. So even outside the club whatever we have learned from the club, we take it outside of the club as well, so we still discuss will always say like, 'so what did [the tutor's name] say the last class', 'so did you…' and we will talk about how to apply these things in our own *academic* work as well, so it brought me closer to people, especially one and them, then what we have learned from the class, I think we're able to apply to our own academic work too.

003 AF: Mmm

    004 D2: I see it as a means of connecting.

Box 8-1 Example section of transcript from Interview 1, participant D2 'Yasmine'

Summary of Participant's meaning	Noting	PETC No. New PETC	Segment No.
Enjoys connecting with people. Club helped get closer to colleagues. Also chatted online outside club to continue the conversation.	*Shows much enthusiasm for club throughout. (Might be saying this to please me?). Emphasis on word 'closer'. Also relates to 'relationships' PETC.*	*2*	*1-D2-002*

Table 8-1 Example section of analysis sheets from Interview 1

The note in brackets is important when analysing interview data. Here, I feel that it is difficult to eliminate my expectations and my own thoughts.

On 6/09/2022 I noted the following in my Reflexive Notebook.

> *'Sometimes I put a bracket around my noting where I felt my interpreting of the participant's meaning seemed to be 'guessing'.*

Box 8-2 Reflective Notebook entry

As mentioned in the analysis approach chapter, Smith et al. (2009) maintain that bracketing involves 'interpretative engagement' while eliminating preconceptions. Therefore, I have tried to show my thinking here. I think Yasmine's point is important to understand her general experiences and relationships in the club but on the other hand this is subjective, so I have bracketed the fact that she might be trying to please me being her tutor rather than removing this. Within the 'General Experiences in the Club' OT, four participants explained their reasons for joining the club.

For example:

> Diamond: '… I didn't know what to expect … I was curious to see how it would impact my studies …' (1-C2-002)

The word 'curious' probably relates to motivation, which is a theme within the 'Personal Learner Factors' OT, explored in Section 8.1.5 of this chapter.

Yasmine and Adaora attended the club in their first year and contacted me several times Asking to join again in their second. Indeed, both stated that they 'look forward to' club meetings (1-D2-028 and 1-D3-042). Both stressed the

importance of connecting with other members (explored further in the relationships section in this chapter). They also stressed that they improved their academic skills (see Academic Skills OT, Section 8.1.4).

A further factor mentioned by four participants was their views of how the club was facilitated.

> Emeke: '… the way you did it, the way you handled it, the way it had been facilitated by you, it wasn't a struggle …' (1-C1-007)

Later in the interview he stated:

> '… the way you broke down the topics for us to learn step by step, and of course the instructions … and every day it was a little bit different … you did your magic.' (1-C1-082)

Emeke seemed to find the teaching engaging, which is a significant point included in the Discussion Chapter 10, Section 10.2.3). He also praised the way it was organised with 'intermittent breakout groups' (1-C1-080), which he said helped the interaction. Again, I am mindful of the fact that students might have been trying to please me in the interviews.

However, regards the teaching, Sam stated:

> '… because we learn about feedback in one of my modules and I know feedback is very important, it wasn't negative, just for us to improve, I'm not saying that to please you, just be honest.' (1-D6-041)

In nursing, feedback, which concerns relaying information between patients and health professionals and vice versa is important. AEL may benefit the quality of feedback (as explained further in the Discussion Chapter 10, Section 10.2). Yasmine, who used to be a teacher, said:

> 'Okay, you made it learner centred … that was *fantastic* … they [students] informed the class kind of thing …' (1-D2-060)

There appears to be no evidence from the interviews, whether other participants thought sessions were learner centred. Nevertheless, it appears these four participants were satisfied with the teaching.

When referring to the teaching, Yasmine mentioned some differences between learning about communication skills in the club and in their Mental Health Nursing modules.

> '… so we have discussion around this [academic writing, communication skills] and things like that … it's quite different from discussing modules … a different conversation entirely.' (1-D2-008)

It is interesting that she uses the word 'conversation' here in that this was a conversation club and describes some of the skills facilitated in the club. Yasmine's point might indicate convergence between the Academic Skills and AEL OTs too. Similarly, regarding comparisons of the teaching in the club with other modules, Isaac explained the difference as follows:

> 'We learn communication [in our other classes], we talk about it in everything that we do, but this is a time [in the club] where we talk about it and see how other people think about it and have the opportunity for people to suggest better ways of doing it, and so I have learned that and I actually think that's the way it should be taught and it was.' (1-D4-036)

Isaac's statement was reassuring to me because AEL was an important skill that I had presented and asked members to practise in the club as one of my aims. Therefore, it appears that AEL or communication skills had either been taught differently or not practised in modules on their programme. This point also highlights the importance of AEL which was the learning focus of the clubs.

In summary, several participants in the first part of the club describe the club using adjectives with a very positive meaning. Four explain why they were motivated to join (including two who attended for a second year) and four praise the teaching. Furthermore, good relationships between club members and one or more skills within my AEL model are mentioned by all participants. This is likely to imply a positive learning experience for students.

Interview 2

Analysis of this interview includes the five participants' experiences who attended the second part of the club. It relates to the two sessions, one which was mainly revision and the other involved preparing and recording the Podcast. Participants

also revealed aspects about their learning in these sessions, and then overall general experiences in the club in both parts. Regarding general experiences in Part 2, the interaction between the club members appears to have been positive. Diamond and Yasmine explain how they were able to share their views, despite sometimes a difference of opinion.

> Diamond: 'The experience was quite nice, yeah because I had the opportunity to interact with my peers and everyone seems to have different views regarding that topic, and you know, knowing everyone is correct [but] … just a different way of thinking about it …' (2-C2-002).

> Yasmine: '… so we learned that [critical analysis and academic argument] … and putting that into practice, I learned that more with engaging with others, yeah.' (2-D2-010)

Diamond's point suggests she is keen to earn from others and without judging them. Listening non-judgementally is important in Active Empathic Listening, as mentioned in the literature in Chapter 3-Active Empathic Listening. In addition, Yasmine's point is noteworthy in that it suggests peer engagement may be helpful in developing critical analysis and academic argument as academic skills.

Isaac mentioned learning from another member too.

> Isaac: 'The revision session was quite good … but I think the explanations by [Yasmine] and your guide is very useful …' (2-D4-002).

Similar to Diamond, Yasmine and Isaac, Emeke stated members were able to learn from each other, as well as develop their social and writing skills.

> Emeke: 'Yep, … improving our social skills … and meeting new people some of us have never met on such a level [in] online classes … we shared more views, we were able to understand each other more, we learn from each other more … like I said the academic writing skills, the Oral Paraphrasing was a big one for me … it got polished …' (2-C1-006).

The participants appear to have had positive experiences in the club in Part 2. To clarify this, I have explained my interpretation in my summary and noting of the data on the analysis sheets. Below is an example relating to Emeke:

Summary of Participant's meaning	Noting	PETC No. New PETC	Segment No.
Second part of club was 'amazing'. You make meetings interesting so time flies. I was able to revise what I missed in the last session of the first part. Good to be together again.	*He continues to show genuine enthusiasm for the club and benefits. Uses 'amazing' twice. (Agreed- he missed session 5 of Part 1.)*	*25*	*2-C1-002*

Table 8-2 Example section from analysis sheets Interview 2

Furthermore, all five participants in Part 2 of the Club mentioned planning & recording an extract for the school Podcast in Part 2. This point has been included in the charts of Figure 8-3 and Figure 8-4 for the second Part of the club and corresponding interview and assigned to the 'General Experiences in the Club Emerging Theme for Part 2 only', as well as, 'Reflecting on the whole club experience in Part 2'.

Working towards the Podcast appeared to be a positive experience for all student participants. For example:

Emeke: '… so I never recorded a Podcast before … seeing the output we had within a very short time we were able to achieve quite a lot and the way we came up with questions and … responses, … meet and record, I think it was just two sessions, it was amazing …' (2-C1-004)

Yasmine: '… I was excited about the Podcast, it was for listening to everybody speak … because it allows us to put into practice what we learned because it's all about conversation now … we have taken the conversation further [to the Podcast] … and letting the whole world see it.' (2-D2-036)

Isaac: 'Recording the Podcast requires some skills … we thought about how the recipients would receive this … and we changed it to make sure it is

effective, clear and there was no ambiguity, that taught me that communication is a two-way traffic …' (2-D4-021)

These quotes highlight the communication aspect of the club and how planning and recording the extract for the Podcast involved significant communication skills between club members. Members were apparently able to listen attentively to be able to write the Podcast text that was then recorded. The expressions 'able to achieve', 'it's all about conversation' and 'two-way traffic' highlight how the Podcast activities were helpful to communication. Thus, AEL appears to be central to their learning in the club even related to the Podcast preparation and recording activities.

Teaching of club sessions was praised by four participants in the second interview. This reiterates what was expressed in the first interview by Emeke and others. For example, 'like I said the way you facilitate the meetings you make it interesting'. The way participants perceive the teaching is significant to learning'.

Adaora and Isaac show a difference of opinion regards their overall experience of the club after the second part.

> Adaora: 'I feel that the club is very *important*, especially for international students, we get to have people from various backgrounds … if they [tutors] want to make it compulsory that would be great …' (2-D2-013)

Isaac's opinion differed regards international students and he revealed that rather than improving English language, the club reached him as a nursing student in his practice because it 'equips me better at dealing with placements and in dealing with service users' (2-D4-011).

Both participants are Nigerian; however, when the club started, Adaora was a newly arrived international student and Isaac had been living in Britain for about 20 years. Nevertheless, it appears to be the communication aspect that was practised in the club between members, which was beneficial to his professional practice rather than the language aspect was most important to him. Indeed, he recommended that the club should be 'rebranded' to attract students to the communication skills for nursing aspect of the club. For him 'communication skills' was more important than improving language (or academic skills).

The importance of AEL for nursing students and the way it was practised in the club is emphasised. In addition, Emeke states that AEL was 'a big one for me' (2-C1-06) and Diamond maintains it was 'one of the most important skills' (2-C2-010) in terms of her understanding of service users, as well as academic reading and writing. The other three participants were consistent in explaining the importance of AEL for them. They highlighted how the Oral Paraphrasing was useful.

Furthermore, four participants felt that the skills they learned helped them to be more confident speaking in online synchronous SGLCs. For example, Yasmine states:

> 'Confidence fantastic, I think I've gotten to the stage where I feel fully confident yes with having conversation online … speaking with people, yeah sharing ideas and it's taught me how to listen …' (2-D2-031)

It appears that Part 2 of the club helped to revise and gain a sense of the importance of AEL, as well as gaining confidence in online synchronous SGLCs, in practice placements and in general communication with others. The club seems to have helped members build good relationships that was needed at the time where some Covid-19 restrictions were continuing to make meeting problematic (although Covid-19 is not mentioned in Interview 2). The teaching of the clubs was also praised by four participants, highlighting that instructions were clear and the learning appeared to be made engaging.

Interviews 1 and 2 combined

Both interviews reveal similar findings. It appears that Part 2 of the club helped students to further practise skills learned through the revision session of Part 1, as well as the Podcast activities. Continuing good relationships between club members seem to have been maintained in Part 2 but only mentioned by two of the five in Interview 2. Their confidence employing AEL skills is likely to have been enhanced in the club, and the Part 2 gave them some further practice of AEL and Academic Skills. Confidence is explored further within the Personal Learner Focus OT.

The following five sections in this chapter focus on the overarching themes: AEL, Online learning and Covid-19 Impacts, Academic Skills & Other Learning, Personal Learner Factors (shyness, confidence, engagement, participation, motivation and Identity) and Relationships in the Club. These explain participating students' experiences of the club in more depth.

8.1.2. Overarching Theme 2 – Active Empathic Listening

As mentioned above and illustrated in the bar charts for Interviews 1 and 2 in the previous section the benefits appear to outweigh the difficulties when developing AEL skills. Furthermore, it is significant that participants were able to explain how developing these skills worked for them.

All participants in both interviews provided details about Active Empathic Listening (AEL), which I had presented and had asked students to practise in breakout rooms and to further discuss in the main room. These are important findings, which I have included in the Discussion (Chapter 10) that have implications for HE pedagogy, explained in the final chapter (Chapter 11).

Below is an extract from the spreadsheet to illustrate how the AEL overarching theme is organised using the same colours for the theme names as the bar charts mentioned above (Figure 8-1 and Figure 8-3).

OT Name	Theme Name	Emerging Theme Name
AEL	OP	OP - How it works
	OP	OP – Benefits
	OP	OP- Difficulties
	Listening	Listening - How it works
	Listening	Listening – Benefits
	Listening	Listening- Difficulties
	Oral Communication/conversation	Oral communication/conversation- General
	Oral Communication/conversation	Oral communication/conversation- Benefits
	Oral Communication/conversation	Oral communication/conversation- Difficulties

Table 8-3 Extract from Interviews 1 & 2 combined for AEL overarching theme

Participants used the terms AEL, listening, Oral Paraphrasing, communication skills or conversation, sometimes interchangeably, which is why I had first divided

these into separate themes and then clustered them into the AEL overarching theme.

Indeed, my model in the Venn diagram (Figure 3-2, Section 3.5) illustrates how Listening with Attention, OP and Asking Open Questions are interrelated. Findings related to these skills (themes) within the AEL overarching theme are explained below in detail for each interview and then overall.

Interview 1

All participants talked positively about learning and practising AEL, that is either regarding listening (sometimes listening was referred to as active, attentive or empathic listening skills), Oral Paraphrasing or both listening and OP aspects within my AEL skills model in online synchronous learning. Occasionally, participants used the term 'feedback' instead, which is used in professional nursing practice.

Seven participants stressed they had improved their listening skills and how that worked in various contexts based on what they had learned from the club. For example, Olivia talked about learning the 'art of listening' from the clubs and that she noticed that she often interrupts when other people are talking.

> 'The first thing I learned with regards to communication is the art of listening. Because I find that I'm someone that um I want to talk, I want to say my mind, but sometimes I don't *listen* to the person that I am talking to. And I tend just to butt in, and you know, without listening properly so that I forget what that person is saying, so yes I have learned the art of listening *attentively*. Because it is when you listen that you can get the message that has been passed to you. More so, if you don't listen, the person that is talking to you will think you are not helping him or her, and you know, might be offended in one way or the other, and that does really show empathy as well, so yeah my art of listening has really improved.' (1-C3-061)

It is interesting that Olivia stresses the words 'listen' and 'attentively', as well as talking about lack of empathy when not listening. This suggests that attentive listening can be useful to learn and practise for 'talkative' or 'monopoliser' students

in a SGLC, explained further in the Discussion in relation to Compassion-focussed pedagogy. In addition, it shows development of her listening skills.

In relation to listening in face-to-face conversations, Yasmine mentioned how she has learned to show empathy and admits that she had noticed previously losing eye contact.

> 'Well, now I'm conscious of listening. Yes, I am conscious because this skill … is a skill that is required in my line of profession, so I have consciously paid attention to my listening skills. So I tried to just listen yeah with *empathy*. Listen, with my full attention now, before I used to when you're talking to me, sometimes, especially where we are face to face, sometimes I can hold on to my phone … I don't do that anymore. Because I think I see now that I understand now that you need to make an eye contact for that person, so you just put your phone aside. So this is because sometimes you know we press our phone unconsciously sometimes. Even when we don't really have anything to do on that phone, but we're just so used to the phones … because I know that I will be needing this skill.' (1-D2-055)

Here, Yasmine explained where she consciously improved her listening skills and empathy, which she will need in future with the stress on the word 'empathy'. The point about looking at her phone is valid because it is interesting that such a diligent MSc student (who never missed a club session) admits that even she looks at her phone during conversations with others. Her noticing of this is an important stage in her development of Listening with Attention (LwA). Although the club focused on AEL in synchronous online conversations, it is interesting that Yasmine related listening with empathy to in person situations. It is also significant that it appears she was less conscious of empathising before the club.

Karen saw the benefits of active listening in her future career.

> 'Well I would say I became very aware of it [active listening]. You know I became more aware of it than ever before. Yeah and I tend to use it in the course of my career as a mental health nurse because it will help me and it will help help my patients.' (1-D5-055)

It is important to mention that Karen, Yasmine and Olivia, for example, and the other four participants described LwA, practised in the club sessions albeit online

synchronously, as well as how they have employed this skill further to situations outside the club in face-to-face conversations in their nursing placements and in general conversations.

Six participants highlighted benefits of Oral Paraphrasing or how it worked for them within the AEL overarching theme. For example, Sam explained how OP was beneficial and how he used it online, in lectures and in general conversations.

> 'Definitely … this club really *helped* my concentration level. And when people talk to me now I concentrate more. I want to try to get what the person is trying to say to me, and second after I try to confirm if I get the content of the message right by paraphrasing, after I ask … do you mean this or do you mean that, just to confirm, if I get it right tell me that is correct … So [it] gives me a clearer interpretation of what people are telling me, so it happens in lectures now, it's happening in discussion and this happened in general life.
> And er it really helped so much, yeah'. (1-D6-46)

The word 'definitely' and the phrase 'it has helped me so much' emphasised the benefits of OP for Sam and how it worked for him outside the club too. I noticed this when listening to the recording and then added this point in the noting column.

Summary of Participant's meaning	Noting	PETC No. New PETC	Segment No.
Club- & esp. OP helped concentration- clearer interpretation of lectures now- helps generally and in life	*Benefit of OP for more attentive listening as it helped concentration- (this matches my teaching aims of OP/AEL) Stress on word 'helped'.*	*5*	*1-D6-046*

Table 8-4 Section of analysis sheet for interview 1

Similarly, like Olivia, Yasmine and Karen, Sam demonstrated that he tried to use OP not just in the club but in other situations too. The benefits of OP were also important for Seye when communicating online, as well as with patients in healthcare settings.

> 'Well what I'll just take from the clubs is you know with online lectures being the order of the day now is to get fully involved, let the other person know that you are involved because the other person is far away.

And with the patients as well it's important for them to understand that you're communicating properly so using the paraphrasing is also good so that they know you understand.' (1-C4-056)

The point Seye made about being 'fully involved' online when 'far away' is interesting. It appears that online synchronous communication creates an artificial distance between speakers and listeners for him. He also said OP helps show understanding. Regarding OP and understanding, Diamond explained in detail about how OP helped her prevent misunderstanding a patient, as in the following example of how she clarified what a patient had said.

'That was good because I'm conscious of that now so always make sure I *paraphrase* whenever someone is talking to me, because I had this service user also he was telling me about the effect of the medication had on him …
but I didn't want to *assume* that I had heard correctly what he said, so I paraphrased like, you are trying to say that, or do you mean that this medication is making you feel tremendous amount of discomfort and pain and headache, and he said, 'no no no' … but if I had *gone away* with the first impression made the first information I thought I had, I would have communicated wrongly to the nurse [about the patient's experience of the medication] …' (1-C2-016)

The repetition of the patient saying 'no' (in Diamond's words) may emphasise how OP is important in conveying messages from patients to other health professionals, often referred to as 'feedback' in healthcare, explained in the Discussion. However, she was the only participant to mention any possible 'difficulties' with OP in that she thought it required patience; '… but in order to get the information from her I had to be patient as well' (1-C2-039).
This is significant in that participants appear to have found that understanding OP is straightforward but there is a contradiction in that she states it takes time and practice. Therefore, facilitating and the members practising OP in the clubs seems to have been beneficial for learning online, in professional practice and other situations for these participants.

Seven participants talked about communication skills generally or both listening and Oral Paraphrasing within one or more segments that can be related to more

than one AEL skill in my model. For example, Emeke explained how the club has helped develop his communication skills with various stakeholders.

> 'Yes, it has and of course, it has made a major difference in my speaking, um my colleagues at work as well, not just with my class with my colleagues at work and of course the service users too, I know now how to demonstrate empathic listening. I now know how to listen empathically and I know how to communicate better.' (1-C1-069)

Emeke uses the word 'empathically' twice, which corresponds to what Olivia and Yasmine also said about showing empathy towards others in a conversation.
In addition, regarding how OP works with service users, Diamond explains that OP could,

> '… get them to repeat especially those pieces that I have missed without them knowing that I have actually missed that bit.' (1-C2-030)

She then added 'Yeah, I think that helped me develop that skill' (1-C2-032).
I think Diamond's point about the benefit of rephrasing without repeating is interesting in that directly asking to repeat may show lack of attention. Her point about developing the skill is suggests development of skills over time, that I mention in my noting column on the DA sheets.

Referring to one of the club sessions, Olivia talked about the importance of not being judgemental. This can be considered with what she said about learning not to interrupt, as mentioned above, in that she may be paying more attention when listening rather than entering a conversation too quickly.

> 'Yes, one other skill that I picked up is not to be judgemental.
> While in the conversation club there was you know, there was one [member] that … didn't say anything, and I was like why is she not talking what is wrong we're supposed to be three, you know, and I had to ask her why are you not talking and I think that was when I realised that she had had just had removed a tooth or something.' (1-C3-073)

Diamond's point might be relevant to the idea that when communicating synchronously online it is likely to be more difficult to notice other students' difficulties due to restricted visibility and sound quality. OP may have benefited

participants to clarify or ask questions and reduce being judgemental when online. Advantages and difficulties of cameras in online learning are considered in the next section.

Isaac stressed how he had realised that for him verbal communication was more important that written communication.

> '… the way it comes across was the club was being able to do academic writing and being able to write at Level seven [level required for 2nd year MSc attainment] in my mind stands out … so the *verbal* communication is more important than written communication … I can engage with the service user, the staff and the people there first before I go and write the report.' (1-D4-041)

Isaac's quote emphasised the importance of effective communication skills with various stakeholders, and that good oral communication skills are needed as a prerequisite to communicating well in practice which can be a prerequisite to writing for professional purposes. I noticed he spoke in an emphatic tone here, especially emphasising the word 'verbal'.

As mentioned in my data analysis approach (Chapter 7), data relating to two participants suggest a few difficulties about how AEL was experienced. Diamond said that both OP and listening required practise and patience. For example, '… so in order to get the information from her [service user] I had to be patient as well.' (1-C2-039). In addition, Karen stated that one club member who had only attended the club on one occasion towards the end of the first part and had interrupted her in a breakout room. She mentioned that 'We try to give everyone a chance to speak …' (1-D5-037) but in the next segment she admitted:

> '… the only thing I experienced was when one [person] came to the last time. [They] didn't give us any chance to speak … that was the only time I couldn't speak, [they] took everything over' (1-D5-039).

It is not evident whether Karen's experience here was a difficulty regarding relationships, whether AEL was not effective or whether the student who joined later did not have sufficient time to develop their AEL skills. However, Karen had stated that AEL was beneficial to her in that,

'… the discussions were very good and paraphrasing skills too were absolutely brilliant … ' (1-D5-015)

No other participants appeared to reveal any difficulties with employing AEL skills in their studies or placements, nor did they specifically mention problematic relationships regarding the few other club members who did not attend the clubs frequently or mention them at all in any other context.

To summarise this interview regarding AEL skills, all participants stressed how they improved their communication skills, either listening, OP, or both and that they were able to employ these skills in professional, academic and/or general contexts. In other words, they all stated that they were able to develop these skills and only two participants mentioned minor difficulties only. One point of note is that although Asking Open Questions is one circle on my Venn diagram that was presented in the club and was not mentioned by any participant (Figure 3-2 Comparison of Active Listening and Active Empathic Listening Models. This may have been due to only briefly discussing Asking Open Questions in Part 1 because only five of the six sessions I had planned took place due to placements having been brought forward at short notice. (Asking Open Questions was briefly included in the revision session in Part 2 but not mentioned in the interviews.)

Interview 2

Four of the five participants emphasised the benefits of Active Empathic Listening as the main point in one or more segments in this interview. In other words, AEL was mentioned within other data segments, but I had assigned these to different themes, such as shyness/confidence. However, these points were often made in connection with AEL skills. Therefore, there is mention of AEL and how it was beneficial to all participants in many segments, where I had assigned the theme to other themes (as in Interview 1). Thus, there appears to be convergence of themes here. For example, Emeke, mentioned being more confident with 'Oral Paraphrasing' and 'listening' among other skills learned, such as academic writing.

Adaora highlighted the importance of AEL for her in two segments, firstly how it helped improve communication and feedback with service users and secondly how AEL benefitted her academic writing.

> '…I've added to what I already had, you know just to the communication feedback, you know *paraphrasing*, especially Oral Paraphrasing it's been great for me, prior to that I was not very good at paraphrasing properly … it became easier for me to communicate *effectively* … it has really helped me in my placements … [with] my service user and get proper feedback …' (2-D3-007)

In the following segment she then adds:

> 'Yeah, the academic side of things, the [oral] paraphrasing has helped me because when I see an article and I have to write an essay or something you know I am able to paraphrase properly such that when I put it through Turnitin [plagiarism software] … I don't have a lot of plagiarism … because I am able to properly paraphrase … it really helps me very very well.' (2-D3-009)

Adaora emphasised communicating 'effectively' and 'paraphrasing' in the first segment quoted above and uses the word 'paraphrasing' three times in the second. Improving her paraphrasing skills for oral communication and academic writing appear to have been significant for her. Regarding other participants, for Diamond, OP in an academic context has been 'really helpful' to understand lectures which can be achieved by paraphrasing as a way of checking she has 'got the right thing' or 'just to make double sure'.

Isaac was critical about teaching on some modules in his Nursing MSc studies in that he said these modules were theory driven rather than online practical activities, despite the emphasis that communication skills are important in nursing.

> '… my skills development has improved because the club is *not* about theory, the club enabled us to engage in small groups and that is where the skills were practised, when we talk of active listening, when we talk of engaging people, when we talk about confirming that we understand what they say, these things are textbook, we've learned them from whenever we came into social sciences, but the club allowed us to practice it, you put us into breakout groups where we

practise it, where we saw why and the effect of what we do, and I think it's far more effective than the textbook stuff that we have learned up to this date.'

(2-D4-017)

In this quote he talked of engagement and learning on his modules as 'textbook' twice. This is interesting because it seems AEL was beneficial to him by engaging members in breakout rooms and with others outside the club in that he saw 'the effect'. I noticed that again he spoke in an emphatic tone in this interview. My understanding here is that Isaac advised that oral communication should be taught more, rather than too much focus on writing or improving written work that he felt was the case. I discuss this point regarding personal learner factors, engagement and pedagogical implications in Chapter 10 and 11.

As in the first interview, the second revealed that participants' practice of their listening and OP skills in the club helped to increase their awareness, use and effectiveness in AEL techniques both in professional and academic contexts. Participants did not mention any difficulties with AEL or aspects of it in Part 2 of the club.

Interviews 1 & 2 combined

Data from both interviews revealed how all participants developed their communication skills (AEL) and put these into practice in their online learning sessions and professional placements. The second interview revealed that Part 2 of the club contributed to further practise of AEL skills. Practising AEL skills in SGLCs in the club and outside was emphasised as being beneficial in placements with service users, this clearly correlates with my ideographic and group summaries too (See Appendix 5). Many participants stated they became more attentive listeners. They found it useful to practise OP in the clubs and learned how it helped to clarify what was said and to show empathy. Several subsequently used OP to help written paraphrasing that appears to have reduced plagiarism compared with their prior academic writing, which is likely to have contributed to improving those students' written work.

Difficulties employing AEL skills were only minor and were revealed by two participants in one interview. None of the participants mention Asking Open

Questions in either interview. Finally, data suggests all participants reflected positively overall on their lived experiences of developing AEL skills in the club group.

8.1.3. Overarching Theme 3 – Online Learning & Covid-19

Interview 1

This OT focuses on experiences of online synchronous learning and the impact of Covid-19 on learning. Studying online was employed in approximately half of the teaching sessions in participants' second year of the MSc Mental Nursing Programme, which was the year that the clubs and interviews were held (September 2021 to August 2022). All participants interviewed talked about their general experiences of studying in an online synchronous environment that they compared with their synchronous online learning experiences in the club. Half talked about these generally, such as whether they had studied online prior to starting their MSc Nursing course. Eight members mentioned benefits and five talked of difficulties when learning online, of whom three described both benefits and drawbacks. Four talked about an activity in the club where students were asked to have cameras on and then off.

Apart from Emeke, participants did not appear to have any experience of online learning prior to starting their MSc Programme during lockdown. Emeke said he enjoyed online learning on both his MSc Programme and in the club sessions, which he claimed he 'never really struggled with' and possibly preferred compared with in-person classes. He stressed the convenience of not having to travel to the university and how he could make contributions in online synchronous learning while 'relaxed' in his room to which he adds:

> '… and just stay in front of my computer and then listening and then take notes,
> just make contributions when prompted or when I think is appropriate, yeah, so
> I really enjoyed my online learning compared to face-to-face …' (1-C1-038)

Emeke also mentioned the cost of travelling one hour to university on an unreliable bus, whereas online 'relieved the stress'. Nevertheless, he mentioned one drawback.

'Yes, its [online learning] been okay for me, yeah, although sometimes when you're not seeing the person's face it seems like the person's comments are bland like tea without sugar and milk.' (1-C1-046)

Overall, the convenience of not having to travel appears to be a benefit of studying online for Emeke, albeit clearly less personal with cameras off. Likewise, Karen enjoyed the convenience of not having to travel and saving money, although she said the experience of online learning was 'daunting' at first.

'…looking back over two years it's been brilliant.

Yes, I really enjoyed it, the convenience just is really nice, I don't need to travel unnecessarily so you know the broadband I use it anyway, so it didn't really cost me anything.' (1-D5-027)

Yasmine did not enjoy online learning, although she found it could save time and thus less stressful than in person.

'Now we're used to it, we are stuck with it, now we are used to it and now, I think, for now, some people even prefer to have online classes than go to school than physical face to face, and I think probably this is because it takes the stress off you. You don't have to wake up so early…' (1-D2-022)

Yasmine's repetition of 'we're used to it now', using second person three times and 'some people' may indicate her personal dislike of online learning, as well as noticing that becoming more familiar with it may have been true for some of her peers but possibly less so for her.

Half of the participants talked about difficulties of online learning in Interview 1. The lack of social contact and not being able to see people in person was a considerable difficulty for those five participants. For example, Emeke, as mentioned above, talked of online contact being 'bland' and others had a similar view. Here, Diamond expressed her dissatisfaction of online learning and the impact of Covid-19 at the beginning of her studies.

'… in the beginning it was challenging, it was challenging, I was new in the country, I didn't know *anybody* and I had to you know study online, everyday in the room by myself with no one to talk to … that social interaction is not there [online] even though we just flip the camera to look at the faces of those in class …I found myself by myself with no one to talk to in a foreign country…'
(1-C2-078).

It appears that Diamond felt isolated because online learning was probably not a substitute for meeting people in person, which she expresses by repeating the word 'challenging' twice and 'by myself' three times, and even with cameras on that did not appear to be enough. Similarly, online learning was challenging for Olivia who found herself 'struggling' having started her studies 'during Covid'. Olivia described how online (synchronous) learning was a challenge for her before the club started.

> 'You know it is so *hard* to feel what the other person is feeling, it's so hard to understand what they are going through, because you can't actually … see their face. You can see them online, but you don't know what they are thinking, you don't know whether they are *pretending,* you don't know … ' (1-C3-014).

She stressed the word 'hard' regarding the difficulty of not being able to sense or perhaps empathise what others feel or experience, even suggesting that others might be 'pretending'. This quote might represent an insight into what online learning may have been like for many students who were not able to meet at the time. Like for Emeke, this also appears to refer to having students' cameras off in sessions.

Seye felt that the club would have benefitted him had it started earlier. He stated that this was because of difficulties he had with online learning in his lectures. Sometimes the way some lecturers ran online sessions caused him a few difficulties.

> '… however, learning online has been interesting to see how different lecturers moderate when you have large number of students, sometime moderating them can be a bit tricky, especially when the students have … the authority to unmute anytime as well, you will find that some people are either not raising their hands to speak or they are doing other things in the background you see that some people are not participating, they either forget their mic [unclear] so yeah but online personally I tried to make sure I get myself prepared and I engage in the lecture.' (1-C4-030)

Although Seye tried to contribute to online lectures, he found that some other students did not always appear to do so, which made online learning more of a

challenge. He said that in the club it was easier 'to interact more freely' and the 'population was much smaller'. The small group size is likely to have had an impact on making online synchronous communication easier for participants.

However, it appears that the difficulties Seye expressed in the quote above probably varied with different lecturers. Cecelia, Karen, Juliet and Sam also mention that the small group size was beneficial in online synchronous learning. For example, when asked about her experience in the breakout rooms, Juliet stated:

> 'I… It was very nice it was in little breakout rooms, is quite easy to learn. You know, it was that you are able to air your views and, and you know, is it because the groups were small, it was easy to learn from other examples and form others to learn from you. You know some of us sometimes that are shy… when we get a breakout group is because of the small size is just it's not daunting makes it easy so we're able to contribute. Yeah.' (1-D5-033)

It is interesting that she felt the small breakout groups may have been helpful for 'shy' learners to contribute. Similarly, other participants talked about being shy, (see Personal Learner Focus OT, Section 8.1.5 in this chapter).

Adaora, who arrived in the UK in 2020, stated that the level of support from lecturers when working on online group learning activities was less online compared with in the classroom.

> 'You know you have to talk about what he has told us to do [when in person] he's right there he can see us, he can hear us, so when it's up on Zoom when it's online you don't have lecturers in our group to help anyone …'. (1-D3-032)

Therefore, she appears to have felt there was less lecturer support in online learning. She does not mention the raise hand function and other emoticons on Zoom here and it is not clear if Adaora is referring to synchronous or asynchronous lectures. In addition, there does not appear to be any evidence to suggest that lack of direct contact with lecturers might have contributed to the isolation Diamond, who also arrived in 2020, described. Nevertheless, both appear to be critical of online learning being less personal.

Regarding studying during the pandemic, five participants explained how Covid-19 had an impact due to fewer possibilities to meet in person. Yasmine, one of the three international students in the club, who had also attended the club in her first year, emphasised that arriving in the middle of a Lockdown was a 'huge challenge for me'. However, she was able to see a positive side in that:

> '… but we took hold of that opportunity, at least we had the screens to talk to someone … you know life is full of challenges and it's just for us to take the positives [laughs] … so I just look at the flip side of it, this pushed me to join the conversation club to be part of the conversation club and I always look forward to it … but [online learning] was really a challenge' (1-D2-018)

Repetition of the word 'challenge' is likely to be significant here although Yasmine seemed to have been able to overcome most difficulties over time. Similarly, Isaac was able to get over some of the online challenges during Covid times and was quite positive.

> '…no matter what happens to Covid we pray it's gone forever, you know online teaching has become part of our learning modes and we have accepted it, so we cope with it, relate to it and give it our best' (1-D4-021)

Both Isaac's and Yasmine's quotes show a connection between the pandemic and online learning. Furthermore, Emeke and Diamond explain why they chose to study Nursing during the pandemic.

Emeke, who had enjoyed online learning prior to his MSc Nursing studies, explained that he chose to study nursing

> '…no matter what because Covid was what changed my mind, I decided to go into healthcare instead of environmental sciences' (1-C1-020)

to which he added,

> 'I saw the positive part of Covid during my study, so I am grateful to achieve during the period…' (1-C1-027)

Similarly, Diamond chose the course because she wanted to help people, despite leaving her country and her family's concerns about the risk of catching Covid-19.

'… everybody thought I was crazy … if I really want to help people it should be
to a point where I am willing to give even if it's my life to save somebody else…'
(1-C2-078)

Juliet was also quite positive about the impacts of Covid-19 despite having caught
it 'at some point' and said, 'but I just live with the new normal so it's just getting
used to how things are and doing things' (1-D1-024). In fact, she was generally
positive about online learning.

'It's been good, I feel like I contribute more or have been contributing more
online, because you're not in the midst of so many people so it's just you, you
can see people on screen but it's not face-to-face, they are not real'.
(1-D1-026)

It is interesting that Juliet describes people online as 'not real'. Nevertheless,
online learning during Covid times seems to have been a generally positive
experience in terms of her participation or confidence to participate during
sessions. She does not state whether practising AEL had an impact to her
confidence in contributing to conversations online.

There is some evidence regarding having cameras on or off in the paragraphs
below that shows a connection with practising AEL online for some participants,
which may have boosted confidence. A further aspect of online learning in both
club groups was revealed by four participants, in which members practised
conversations in breakout rooms first with cameras on and then with them off.
Seye talked about this activity in some detail.

'Yeah you know participating, you encouraged us to put our cameras on, which
is good because it enables that active listening and it also gives the other
person the confidence that you are present, that you are paying attention, so it
was important to fully participate, because most of our lectures are online, yes
some of our lecturers have also complained that that they do not see the
cameras on … when its online is important that we put on cameras so that the
lecturer knows we're all participating … so [when] camera is on there is a
chance you pay more attention to what is going on as well.' (1-C4-022)

This point is significant in that it may confirm that developing AEL skills was helpful towards him participating actively in synchronous club sessions, which may have extended into other learning sessions too. AEL seemed to boost confidence among others when online in terms of listening with 'attention'. In other words, for Seye, having cameras on appears to indicate he participated actively and that he found the activity of having cameras off and then on beneficial to active participation.

It is interesting that attentive listening seemed easier, according to Seye, when cameras were on.

Diamond explained how she found the activity with cameras off and then on useful.

> '... I also learned the importance of communication and the importance of making sure my camera's on ... because that practice actually taught me, you know when we had to turn the camera off and speak to the same person and then turn it on, and I realised it felt like I was speaking to a brick wall because it felt like I wasn't even sure if anyone was there ...' (1-C2-089)

Diamond's expression of 'talking to a brick wall' when cameras are off is interesting considering the virtual environment and that she recognised the benefits of cameras on. Here, I noted the following:

Summary of Participant's meaning	Noting	PETC No. New PETC	Segment No.
Learned 'importance of communication'- also benefits of having cameras on when turned on to communication- when turned off 'it was like speaking to a brick wall' as you don't know if anyone is there.	*Cameras on – may benefit comm in synchronous OL sessions.* *(Did she say this because I said so when teaching? Or had she realised it herself?)* *She seems to emphasise the communicative importance of AEL skills but lack of communication with cameras off.*	*14*	*1-C2-089*

Table 8-5 Example section from analysis sheets Interview 1

Here, I have questioned how far Diamond noticed this herself or whether I had mentioned some difficulties I have during the club teaching session when students'

cameras are off, which she may have remembered me talking about. There might be some bias on my part for making a connection between the word 'communication' and AEL as a communication skill. Nevertheless, Diamond saying 'it was like talking to a brick wall' is likely to be significant. Furthermore, Diamond's quote might be similar to what Emeke said about online learning being 'bland', as well as Olivia's talk about lack of empathy or understanding of other people's feelings when online.

Emeke also appeared to have benefitted from the activity with cameras on and off, when talking about his role in the club, he said:

> '… so I made sure cameras were on … and I ensured the breakout room actually achieved its purpose …' (1-C1-016)

It seems that Emeke tried to make the most of this activity, as well as Seye and Diamond. Practicing this was presumably helpful. In contrast to these three participants in Group C, one participant in Group D, Karen, had a different opinion. Here Karen stated,

> '… when we put the camera off, for some of us [it] didn't make any difference or … [it] was because we knew each other already. […] some people will say they concentrated more because there was nothing going on in the background to distract them … so that is what I felt …' (1-D5-064)

She explained:

> 'Yes, yeah, when there's no distraction you know, sometimes you just tend to focus on the voice and focus on what you're hearing and you're listening is more focused … it's just your main focus if there's no distraction…'
> (1-D5-056,058)

This suggests a divergence of opinion in that for Karen it seems beneficial to have had cameras *off*, which meant more focused concentration that helped her own listening to be more attentive, but for Diamond and Seye having cameras *on* meant others could listen and participate better in an online group. Nevertheless, this might indicate that the activity aided communication, which I discuss further later and in relation to my Teaching Log. Indeed, the activity of having cameras

on and off appears to have been useful for these four participants, regardless of their preferences to have the cameras on or off.

It seems that there is a convergence between the AEL skills theme and the cameras on and off activity in that the activity helped them to notice their use of AEL skills or possibly employing their AEL skills during the activity helped them to notice whether or not it was beneficial to have cameras on or off.

To summarise this section about online learning and Covid-19 impacts, studying online during the pandemic appears to have been challenging for most participants apart to some extent for Emeke. The challenges of online learning and the impact of Covid-19 were made explicit by the three newly arrived students in England in the club. Although club participants explained that online learning *is* different from in person, they appeared to overcome most difficulties and online learning had got easier over time. Three mentioned that they would have benefitted more from online learning if the club had been held earlier on in their course. This suggested that the club was helpful to overcome some of the online challenges.

Furthermore, the club may have been helpful to reduce feeling loneliness for two of the participants when not being able to socialise in person. This is likely to be important regarding relationships in the club, explored in Section 8.1.6 of this chapter.

Finally, the activity of having cameras on and then off appears to have been useful, which was possibly enhanced due to practising AEL in breakout rooms.

Interview 2

In this short interview, only Isaac spoke about online learning, which was related to overcoming difficulties of online learning in connection to Covid-19 impacts, similar to what he said in the first interview.

Interviews 1 & 2 combined

It seems that online synchronous learning practised in the club improved participants' confidence in contributing to OSL conversations that was suggested in terms of better participation and engagement by four participants in the first interview, although they don't mention this again in the second interview. The terms 'participation' and 'engagement' are often employed interchangeably, explained further in the Discussion chapter 10. Nevertheless, the word

'synchronous' was not used, however, students did clearly mention listening and speaking, so synchronous learning was implied.

Overall, it appears that club members seemed to have improved their ability to learn together in OSL synchronously. The AEL skills practised online in the club may have contributed to more confident conversations between members and with others on their course, especially in conjunction with the cameras on and off activity.

8.1.4. Overarching Theme 4 – Academic Skills & MSc MHN Programme

This section reveals my analysis relating to what participants reported regarding academic skills and their Mental Health Nursing programme in the interviews. Here, academic skills include written paraphrasing, critical thinking, critical analysis, argument, academic language and referencing. Aspects of participants' learning experiences on the MSc MHN Programme, which might have been significant to learning the club are included. Findings include how AEL contributed to some aspects of Academic Skills.

Interview 1

Academic Skills were specifically mentioned by six participants (three in each group) in Interview 1. For example, Emeke talked about Academic Skills three times during the interviews mentioning oral and written paraphrasing, referencing, synthesising, analysis and academic vocabulary. For example:

> '… when you try to teach us academic writing … and then the paraphrasing as well … the way you brought it in again and the Oral Paraphrasing itself … I believe it really improved my [written] paraphrasing and the referencing, as well as synthesis of information and then the analysis as well, you know the words, the list of some words you gave us during the sessions, I believe yeah they are good, yeah' (1-C1-031)

Here, it seems Emeke found that OP and the phrases presented to paraphrase orally were helpful towards written paraphrasing and other academic skills. This suggests that teaching OP may contribute to success in academic writing. In

addition, Yasmine emphasised how she gained in confidence in academic writing from being in the club.

> 'Well from the club, you see, I have gained confidence with academic writing, yeah, and yes I've gained a lot of *confidence*, I can just look at the paper now and tell you what is wrong with referencing … I can easily do that … yeah and tone and tonality proper language … I know the language of academic writing better … I have gained a lot, I know I have improved a lot' (1-D2-049)

Repetition and stress on the word 'confidence' is interesting here. It appears she may not have felt as confident in her writing when she started the club and her studies as a newly arrived international student to the UK the previous year. Similarly, related to improvement in academic writing, Adaora explained that from attending the club 'I'm now a better writer' and 'I analyse more rather than describing' (1-D3-006), despite admitting she had previously 'struggled with learning' but 'now I know it has become easier to start my academic work' (1-D3-022). She further stated she had improved in organising writing, avoiding using the first person and checking for language and spelling errors. (Adaora also emphasised the benefit of the club for her being an international student in Interview 2) As mentioned, both Yasmine and Adaora attended the club in the previous year too, therefore development academic skills is likely to have accumulated over a longer time of attending the clubs for these two participants.

Diamond also felt her academic writing improved from learning phrases to show 'critical thinking', which had been presented in the club. She listed three examples of phrases presented (as in the slides in Chapter 4.7), which had 'helped me in my writing' (1-C2-018). In addition, checking the club session slides to 'refresh my memory while working on my assignments' (1-C2-010) was helpful. Seye and Juliet also stated that attending the club benefitted their critical thinking but did not provide details (1-C4-010, 1-D1-030). Analysis of these six participants therefore suggests that, learning in the club extended beyond the session conversations and was applied to and improved academic writing and critical thinking. Developing Academic skills alongside AEL skills is likely to have contributed to academic success as well as benefitting oral communication.

Half of the participants mentioned their MHN studies in Interview 1 in general. Therefore, I have included quotes from the interviews that seem relevant to the club as well as in their other studies. For example, Emeke found time management was a challenge.

> '… and now the challenge is trying to combine work and study … having to work and study at the same time…' (1-C1-065)

In the same segment, he added that he was happy with the study programme.

> '… besides the lectures are very amazing I don't think I have any complaints for any particular lecture of module …' (1-C1-065)

In addition, Diamond found the amount of work on the programme demanding:

> 'having *so* much to study before a lecture *wasn't* helpful, it was too much sincerely …' (1-C2-081)

Her emphasis on the words 'so' and 'wasn't' suggested that time management was stressful despite her statement in the previous segment that she was motivated to 'study ahead' so she could prepare 'more relevant questions' for upcoming sessions in her modules. What may be significant regards the club here, is that all participants were attending the club in their free time, although voluntary attendance in their free time was not mentioned in any of the interviews. Nevertheless, Emeke, Diamond and three other participants clearly suggested that there were considerable demands on their time during their studies.

Approximately half the students' time on Pre-registration Nursing programmes is spent in university and the other half on placements. On MSc Nursing programmes the majority of students are classed as mature students over the age of 21 (who already have a degree or equivalent). Being older students they are more likely to have considerable commitments outside their studies, for example, work and family. This point relates to the next section in this chapter, personal learning factors.

In this interview, Yasmine felt the club was more helpful for her in the second year she attended. She explained that in the first year members were from both Mental

Health and Adult Nursing fields but she found it easier when among Mental Health Nursing students only.

> '… we were able to *relate* better to articles or with each other because we're
> studying the same thing … so we always like [say] 'no it's in mental health' …
> it is field specific … it improves our connectedness, err connectivity.'
> (1-D2-043)

In Yasmine's opinion it seemed that learning in the club was more beneficial among students on the same nursing programme than two different ones. This is despite some modules being taught to both Adult and Mental Health Nursing cohorts, who attend the same lectures together but separately in seminars. Nevertheless, assessment in interprofessional collaboration is an NMC requirement taught on both under- and postgraduate pre-registration nursing courses (that I have provided specific Academic Skills workshops on). Therefore, it is possible that other students may or may not have preferred to be in a club among students following different nursing programmes, such as Adult, Children's or Learning Disability Pre-Registration Nursing, or indeed other healthcare and related professions.

Isaac, Olivia and Sam explained that it was a disadvantage to join the club as late as their second year. For example Issac stated:

> 'When we first started online lectures it was all very new … sometimes the
> students were unable to express themselves well because of the lack of non-
> verbal communication [online] but I think that after the first year we knew it is
> the way it will be, this is how the cookie crumbles … we got better at relating to
> ourselves online and at relating to the lecturer … so against that background,
> we now came to the club' (1-D4-019)

In other words, he seemed to have already made progress in communicating in his other taught sessions after having been learning online on the programme for two semesters. This implied he had got used to online lectures by the time the club started. Here, he does not mention whether AEL skills was of additional benefit specifically to online synchronous communication.

Olivia and Sam explained that they may also have benefitted more had they started attending the club in their first year too. For example, Olivia said when she started the club '… I then realised I had learned a lot [in the club], but I could have benefitted more if it had started earlier' (1-C3-004). Moreover, Sam stated that he would recommend the club to any student at the same university 'especially in the first year of study' (1-D6-048). This is given the background that all students on the programme started in Lockdown, could not meet in person to talk about issues, and for the majority online learning was new and challenging for them especially at first. There is convergence here to the online learning and Covid impacts OT. As mentioned, in the 'General experiences of the club' section, Karen suggested the club may have been even more beneficial to her had it been run a semester earlier. Therefore, four participants may have preferred and benefitted more had the club been run earlier in their programme.

Interview 2

Study experiences on the MSc MHN Programme were not mentioned in this shorter interview, however, learning academic skills in the club seem to have been quite important to participants in both interviews. In Interview 2, two of the five participants described some of the academic skills they gained, namely reading and argument.

Diamond felt she had improved her academic reading skills.
> '…I'm able to remember what I read and know how to paraphrase mentally and retain it in my head so that information sticks with me' (2-C2-024)

Her 'mental paraphrasing' could have a connection to developing OP in the online club, which enhanced her engagement with academic texts even when working alone.

Regarding academic writing, Yasmine explained what she gained from how 'everybody chipped in [to the conversation in the club]', which 'caught the full grasp of what is really expected'. This was in relation to learning about 'argument'

in an academic sense and using 'the right choice of words to show this' as revealed in the same segment (2-D2-019). The idea of 'argument' as an academic writing skill had been discussed in the club, so it appeared that Yasmine seemed to have developed this skill in addition to AEL skills.

I have included the transcript segment and noted the following on my on my DS sheet:

> 020-AF: … my next question, which is, reflecting on both parts of the club now, what would you say about your skills development, if at all?
>
> 021-D2: Oh, ahh, number one, I would say I've gotten better with communication essentially. And then communication both written and verbal. Yeah, and I have a better understanding of critical analysis. So my critical analysis got better even with recent results from my assignment, oh yeah, it's showing development in that.'

Box 8-3 Extract of transcript from Interview 2

Summary of Participant's meaning	Noting	PETC No. New PETC	Segment No.
Improved her oral and written comm. as well as in writing assessment results.	*She implies actual grades improved through communication skills (presumably developed in or as a result of participating in the club- Is this to please me?).*	*22*	*2-D2-021*

Table 8-6 Extract of data analysis sheets

Although Yasmine felt the skills learned in the club helped her academically, it is not possible to measure how much or know how far other teaching and learning contributed to improving her academic skills. Again, I question how much she really learned in the club and how much she may have said this to please me as her tutor in that she did not mention other factors that may have contributed to her success in both oral and written communication.

In this interview, it is likely that OP was a contributing factor that may have led to better academic reading and writing outcomes (for these two club members). As with Interview 1, Oral Paraphrasing seems to have been beneficial in terms of both oral communication, as well as academic writing (including for assessments).

Interviews 1 & 2 Combined

According to both interviews, some participants stated they had improved in their confidence and learning outcomes in their written assessments in terms of the academic skills gained in the club. However, it is not possible to measure their improvement in academic skills considering the input of other tutors on their programme and individual student effort, which more than likely had contributed as well. How far the club benefitted members in their MSc MHN Programme is imprecise, although the club seems to have been helpful towards their studies, in terms of AEL skills, academic skills and to some extent to online synchronous learning itself.

8.1.5. Overarching Theme 5 – Personal Learner Factors

The emerging themes participation, engagement, shyness, confidence, motivation, identity and first time studying in the UK are included in the Personal Learner Factors theme and subsequent overarching theme. Therefore, I have considered each of these factors in this section.

Interview 1

Participation and Engagement

I have grouped participation and engagement together since these terms are often used interchangeably in the literature and by the participants interviewed. For example, Yasmine uses both words 'participation' and 'engagement' in the same segment, '… I always look forward to the club activities … and I always fully engage … so well I participate fully …' (1-D2-028).
Participation and engagement are significant themes having been indicated in the data by all participants in Interview 1.

Seye, Juliet and Karen talked about active participation in club small group conversations (SGLCs) when asked if they had a role in the club. Seye said:

> 'I felt it is good to participate … this time we got to put on our cameras, there was more active participation here.' (1-C4-020)

Karen explained that she was 'an active participant in the sense that I contributed to group discussions' (1-D5-022). Juliet also felt she was 'quite active' (1-D1-012) in breakout rooms and in the whole group:

> 'for example, when questions are asked about paraphrasing or what we discussed in smaller groups I am able to paraphrase and I was quite active' (1-D1-014)

Here, participation seemed to imply more than just attendance in sessions, in that club members seem aware of their oral contribution to online synchronous SGLCs.

Relevant to the AEL overarching theme, active participation may be achieved through Oral Paraphrasing in a SGLC, as mentioned by Juliet above. Similarly, Diamond explained:

> 'Yeah so now I'm able to actually, you know, participate in a conversation and be there [laughs] because now I'm conscious that I can, you know, easily lose track of what someone is saying … the best way to handle the situation is to paraphrase orally' (1-C2-029)

Again, this shows convergence between active participation and Oral Paraphrasing. It is interesting that Diamond used the words 'the best way', which implies this was probably significant for her. Using the term 'engagement', Isaac emphasised:

> '…you know [it] brings about *confidence*, they can say well I can trust this [person] seems to know what he's talking [about and] is very open and concentrated, then that buys them in, you know that *engages* them …' (1-D4-046)

Isaac's use of the words; 'confidence', 'trust', 'open' 'engages' and the expression 'buys them in' may suggest his awareness of relationships to others and suggests engagement with them.

Furthermore, AEL practised in the club could improve participation and engagement in conversations with a range of stakeholders, as explained in the AEL section in this chapter. The club therefore seems to have helped student participants to be confident to join, contribute to and engage in conversations online. Students appear to have extended this to face-to-face communication in academic, professional and general situations outside the club. There appears to be some convergence between the Overarching Themes AEL and Relationships. Furthermore, the Discussion Chapter 10 acknowledges some current difficulties with student engagement in HE at the time of writing.

Shyness and Confidence

Seven participants talked about confidence gained in the club, regarding the AEL skills gained. Gaining confidence for some participants appeared to be in

connection with online synchronous learning and/or developing their academic skills, as well as how they improved their confidence in speaking in SGLCs. Some participants mentioned that they appeared to consider themselves to be 'shy' or 'anxious' learners. For example, Diamond, Olivia and Adaora showed how they gained in confidence speaking in online learning. Diamond explained that her confidence grew over time:

> '… so sometimes I can even be sweating, but no one knows that … but over time I just got used to it' (1-C2-062)

Despite saying she previously felt anxious, Diamond seemed to have been talkative and possibly a monopoliser in online synchronous learning (and possibly in other learning or social situations) in that she stated, 'well most times I find myself having to lead the conversations' (1-C2-051). It seemed her confidence increased with practice over time in that she used the words 'having to'. This was in response to my prompt whether she had considered that she had a role in the club in any way. Related to the club, Olivia explained that it helped her gain confidence in several situations in that she first mentioned volunteering to give a presentation to a placement team and then added that the club 'increased my confidence in class as well' including 'our perception of online learning' (1-C3-059).

In addition, Adaora seemed to have gained confidence over time in that referring to the club she stated:

> 'we're normally put in breakout rooms where I'm able to interact with fellow students and also learn from them, so we exchange ideas, so the club increased my confidence level as well' (1-D3-008)

Therefore, it appears that the interaction in breakout rooms facilitated in the club helped Adaora to feel more confident exchanging ideas.

Furthermore, I have noted on my data sheet:

Summary of Participant's meaning	Noting	PETC No. New PETC	Segment No.
Learnt from others in breakout rooms, learnt strategies & exchanged ideas, this helped increase confidence.	*Idea of learning together incr. confidence (Interesting regarding AEL & my shyness project in 2019).*	*18*	*1-D3-008*

Table 8-7 Data analysis sheet Interview 1

Facilitating AEL was also intended to boost confidence in speaking in seminars, especially SGLCs in connection with AEL and my formative earlier EdD project in 2019 about shyness, which is why I noted this. However, there may be some bias here towards my personal aims of the club here.

This is despite Adaora admitting:

> 'Okay so when I first started my course during the pandemic … it was difficult to interact at first … even when we were put in breakout rooms, you know the confidence level was not there …' (1-D3-010)

Presumably the club did help her boost confidence. However, it is not clear how much she felt her confidence could be attributed to previous difficulties interacting because of the pandemic, difficulties with online synchronous learning, or her learning from other classes and tutors.

Similarly, Yasmine stated '… now I speak better, I speak with confidence …' (1-D2-053). However, she did not provide further detail here. Moreover, Sam, the only one of the two male of the four students who suggested he may have been shy, explained how he felt the club helped him gain in confidence. He stated near the beginning of the interview that 'it was really really helpful and it gave me a lot of confidence and that really helped me going forward' (1-D6-014). Then towards the end of the interview Sam said the club:

> 'gave me more confidence, one um naturally I don't talk too much … that's my personality, I prefer to listen than do the talking, when I listen my mind wanders from the discussion, so this club has taught me that I need to be part of the thing, which I am now, now I talk more, first I listen then I ask questions, then I paraphrase and um so those are the benefits I get from this club, so anyway now my participation is more' (1-D6-059)

Repetition of 'really' plus the words 'helpful' and 'benefits' of the club suggests that the club made a difference for Sam, who seems to consider himself a 'shy' learner. Here, developing AEL skills in SGLCs online seems have boosted his confidence and that he could attribute this to learning OP and Asking questions in the club. He does not state whether these were open or closed questions.

Whether these participants felt shy initially or might consider themselves to be shy learners regards contributing in class either online or in person is unclear. Nevertheless, it is significant that participant data suggests seven participants in Interview 1 gained in confidence in their learning and or interactions with others from attending the club. Furthermore, in Interview 2 four participants appear to suggest that the AEL skills developed in the club helped them to be more confident learning online, as explained later in this section in connection with other factors and included in the Discussion (Chapter 10).

Motivation

All four participants in Group C and two in Group D mentioned intrinsic motivation to learn.

Some examples are:

> Seye: '… those that came to the club were all committed to put in the extra time
> to learn, I'm always up for every opportunity…' (1-C4-014)

> Diamond: 'I always want to read everything' (1-C2-089)

Both Emeke and Yasmine stated their interest in future PhD study, for example, 'I'm going for my PhD' (1-C1-017). These statements give the impression that the club members were self-motivated, especially given the time pressure and other commitments being mature MSc 2nd year students, as mentioned in Chapter 2.

Identity and First time studying in the UK

Regarding the two emerging themes, identity and first time studying in the UK, half the participants talked about their identity and two mentioned that they had previously studied outside the country during the main part of Interview 1.

Olivia explained the following regarding her identity:

> '… I was born here they [my parents] took me back [to Nigeria] when I was five
> [and I returned about twenty years later] despite that I am still African … I used

to feel whenever I am going for placement that I was proud to join the conversation club, I used to pray … take me to where there will be people of my colour … where someone will understand me who will not see me as Black … so after the conversation club and the past placement I went with an open mind and yes I can do it'. (1-C3-079)

This is an important quote because it shows Oliva's strength of character regarding possible previous prejudice or discrimination, which she suggests that she had encountered, in that she prayed to be in a group with other Black people, as well as the fact that she had the confidence to speak about it in the interview. She appeared to indicate that attending the club may have helped her to possibly overcome some of the difficult feelings surrounding prejudice or discrimination she had previously encountered in her placements. It is interesting that Oliva said she was 'proud' to join the club. Two of the White students in the club, who did not attend often enough to be interviewed, were in the same group as her (Group C) but she does not mention this. Nor did she mention that I (the tutor researcher) is White. Here, my analysis sheet includes the following:

Summary of Participant's meaning	Noting	PETC No. New PETC	Segment No.
African background, born in UK but lived in Nigeria from age 5. *Felt proud to join club because used to pray to be in groups and placements with other Black people but now has open mind since club and last placement*	*Possible experience of previous prejudice/discrimination?* *Seems to be looking for acknowledgement/acceptance within groups and in her work.*	*19*	*1-D3-079*

Table 8-8 Data analysis sheet Interview 1

It is interesting to consider whether the set of EDI cards included in the first session and photos of Black and Asian role models in each session may have been important to participants in relation to students' perception of their identity in the Discussion chapter 10.

It is also significant that Diamond tells of a misunderstanding with a placement supervisor because of '… cultural shock …' (1-C2-106). This is despite having said:

> '… I don't let anything bother me like anything that has to do with the colour of my skin …' (1-C2-072)

Here, cultural misunderstandings might have been more of a concern for her than skin colour but this is not specified. Furthermore, Diamond does not mention different varieties of the English language. However, she described (in about 30 lines of transcript) that she noticed some socio-cultural differences, 'culture shock' when she phoned her supervisor to check if the supervisor felt better after her supervisor had fallen ill at work. She explained how she learnt from another Black colleague her actions would have been a usual act of compassion in Nigeria, but thought it was unusual in the UK to phone a supervisor at the weekend. Hence, this might suggest cultural differences, despite Diamond's good intentions.

Seye did not mention any difficulties regarding identity.

> 'I know most of the participants are from an African background however if I was to participate with people from other ethnicities I wouldn't feel much different …' (1-C4-028)

Similarly, Emeke did not appear to have difficulties when asked about identity and stated, '…coming to the UK this is my first time but for me the most important thing is just trying to help people …' (1-C1-025). Sam found 'the style of teaching' different in the UK. However, he said this was mainly 'because it was online' and 'I've been out of school for so long' (1-D6-039). Hence, regarding identity, only Olivia and Diamond expressed some concerns about their African identity or colour in their placements, yet none mentioned any discomfort, in the club regards their identity in the interviews or in their learning sessions. There had been a friendly and engaged conversation, in my opinion, when club members reconvened after a breakout room conversation, where one Nigerian student participant had talked about having met President Nelson Mandela and a White British club member mentioned meeting a member of the Royal Family (See Teaching Log, Section 9.3).

Overall, findings from the first interview related to participation, engagement, shyness, confidence, motivation and first time studying in the UK appeared to be significant factors in how student participants communicated in the club; the club is likely to have been beneficial regards these. Participants appeared to be considerably motivated towards their learning in the first place.

My aim to help boost confidence in online synchronous communication and in group learning appears to have been fulfilled at least to some extent. In addition, identity and 1st time studying in the UK did not reveal difficulties for participants within the club, although some discomfort was felt by two members in placements.

Interview 2

In this interview, confidence was the only theme mentioned by four participants, whereas thoughts about participation, engagement and motivation were scarcely included. Participants' thoughts as regards identity and first time in the UK were not evident here.

Emeke, Diamond and Yasmine expressed gaining in confidence in terms of the communication skills learned and practised in the club.
Emeke spoke about becoming more confident in

> 'skills like Oral Paraphrasing, good communication and listening and of course
> when you meet new people you get to share your views and opinions and you
> do it in such a way whereby by just a few people it is a stepping stone to
> improving my confidence' (2-C1-008)

Diamond also said the club 'helped my confidence' and was praised by a doctor for asking 'a lot of questions'. Furthermore, Yasmine spoke with enthusiasm here:

> 'Confidence fantastic. I think I have gotten to the stage I feel fully confident with
> having a conversation online …
> I've also learned to keep quiet and pay more attention' (2-D2-031)

It seems that for Emeke and Yasmine they could attribute their gain in confidence in conversations to AEL and possibly for Diamond too, since practising Asking Open Questions (part of AEL) was discussed in the revision session of the club (Part 2)

due to there not being enough time for it in the first part. Gain in confidence linked to AEL is an important finding.

Nevertheless, I am mindful of possible bias here. Also, I asked a question about confidence that could be thought of as a leading question in Interview 2.

However, it had been my intention to clarify what participants had mentioned in Interview 1 regards this.

Adaora stressed that her confidence speaking, especially online, increased because of the friends she made in the club. She said previously that she 'might be quietly listening but not contributing' but now she has made friends who 'made me comfortable and confident enough to speak even without notes so now I am able to speak boldly, I am able to speak boldly' (2-D3-011). Repetition of the word 'boldly' emphasised her point. Speaking in breakout rooms helped 'to talk among ourselves'. Possibly Adaora gained confidence because of the opportunity that the breakout rooms afford to small groups of students.

Interviews 1 and 2 combined

Considering both interviews together, confidence seems to be a significant theme within the Personal Learner Factors overarching theme in that four participants clarified their previous points made about confidence in the second interview. Indeed, confidence was mentioned within general experiences of the club by seven participants in the first interview before further detail about confidence was asked for.

There is possible convergence between AEL and confidence in that AEL may have contributed to boosting their confidence in online learning and in practice placements. Participation, engagement, motivation, identity and first time studying in the UK appear to be significant themes in the Personal Learner Factors OT, but in the first interview only.

8.1.6. Overarching Theme 6 – Relationships in the Club

Interview 1

All participants in both groups mentioned and suggested that relationships with other club members were positive. For example, Seye in Group C enjoyed listening to and learning with club members:

> 'It was easy you know to communicate communicate amongst each other, and
> it was important to get the views and hear [them].
> We're all laid back and relaxed as peers to freely freely communicate.'
> (1-C4-016)

The words 'communicate' and 'freely' are each repeated twice which may confirm that these relationships were significant to him. Similarly, Adaora in Group D benefitted from learning from her group members, she had developed a close relationship with one in particular.

> 'Yes, the club met my objective like I mentioned. One of the reasons I joined
> was to meet people and enhance my knowledge which I have been able to
> achieve, you know I got close to one of them my classmate now because we
> met in the club …' (1-D3-016)

In the same club group as Adaora, Yasmine said that some club members knew each other before but became closer in the club and is significant to SGLCs and the Nursing Programme.

> 'Yes. And then [we] connected, I know we see [each other] in class. But you
> know it looks more like an *inner circle*. [both laugh] Yes. Inner circle means that
> erm we come together with the same motive … it's quite different from
> discussing modules, even if you are going to apply it to modules, but it's a
> different conversation entirely.' (1-D2-06-08)

It is interesting that Yasmine finds conversations in the club and in her other modules different. It seems the good relationships between club members that she implies helped their conversations as she seemed to be happy to talk about the 'inner circle', which she stressed. In addition, in the other Part 1 group, Olivia talked about how the club members kept in touch outside club sessions through a WhatsApp group that Emeke created for their club group members, 'we started

messaging, we started talking and you know some of us grow closer…' (1-C3-040). Emeke confirmed this saying, '…so after the session we had a chat…' (1-C1-011). Finally, the quotes above suggest good relationships and a friendly learning environment in both club groups in Part 1.

Interview 2

Here two members mentioned relationships, which corresponds to what was said about good connections in Interview 1. Yasmine and Adaora explained how these relationships became more personal. For example, Yasmine said:

> '…so even if you weren't that connected much in [other] classes when you got there [in the club] you find out that this person was actually from my class and it brings us together, even outside the club session we got to talk to each other.' (2-D2-039)

Like Olivia and Emeke in Interview 1, Yasmine maintained contact with peers outside club meetings. WhatsApp groups were created by members in both Groups C and D separately in the first part and then for those five who continued formed a new WhatsApp group in Part 2.

Moreover, Adaora talked about personal relationships and how club members got to know each other in the club and continued talking outside club meetings.

> '… I remember one of our first meetings, I think it was the first one, we had to introduce ourselves, you know it was an exciting time for me because I love meeting new people and I've met these classmates, I've been classmates with them since 2020 [more than one year] but I never knew that [much] about them until that day when [… personal experiences were mentioned that may identify participants …] so it was interesting for me because after class … we got talking …' (2-D3-02)

Here, Adaora revealed some personal experiences of other members she had learnt about. Therefore, she appeared to show her genuine interest in their friendships (excluded from the quote for ethical reasons).

Regarding general experiences in the second part of the club, there is convergence with the relationships OT here in that Emeke said:

> 'we shared more views, we were able to understand each other more, we learned from each other more … you know the Oral Paraphrasing was a big one for me …'(2-C1-006)

However, Emeke does not provide an explanation for the possible connection between OP and relationships in the club. Finally, relationships among the five members (a mix of Group C and D members) in Part 2 of the club appeared to be positive.

Interviews 1 & 2 combined

All ten participants in the first interview illustrated they were able to develop positive relationships in the club and all five either state or imply the same in the second interview. This clearly correlates with my ideographic summaries of each participant and in the group summaries too (see Appendix 5). Furthermore, my teaching aim to provide opportunities for friendships and conversations outside class, at a time when meeting in person was infrequent, seemed to have been achieved in that participants reported that they had and continued to have good relationships to other members in the club.

8.2. Summary

My findings analysed in this chapter suggest that the online academic conversation club enhanced participants' communication skills, especially AEL, in both parts of the club and that participants appear to have developed these skills and gained more confidence in them. Participants were able to describe how they developed their AEL and SGLC skills, which they employed first in online synchronous learning in the club, and then outside the club (in person) in their nursing placements with service users and healthcare professionals. Participants also described using these skills when communicating orally, it seems effectively, in general situations.

Furthermore, many participants stated they became more proficient listening attentively and empathically, and in Oral Paraphrasing. Several explained they had used Oral Paraphrasing to help them with written paraphrasing and that by

learning from each other they employed critical thinking skills and were able to include critical analysis more deeply in their academic writing than before the clubs. These academic skills; paraphrasing and critical analysis, as well as learning from each other are likely to have contributed to improving those students' written assessments, which a few participants have specifically mentioned. Importantly, AEL skills appeared to be a considerable factor in terms of the club's success, as well as a learning benefit in that participants described how they were able to participate actively within the club and continued to engage when meeting outside. It appears that the AEL skills practised in online synchronous learning benefitted student engagement, however, this factor in particular requires further discussion in the Discussion Chapter 10.

Finally, it is significant that all participants explained they were able to develop positive relationships with other club members. This being at a time when some participants may have been lacking in confidence to communicate orally possibly due to some ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, as well as some related personal learning factors related to individual participating students. Personal learner factors, such as shyness, talking too much and/or identity issues, which participants describe they had experienced prior to attending the club, were developed and contributed to their improved communicative competence in online synchronous learning, as well as in their practice placements in person. The next chapter analyses findings from tutor journals and Chapter 10 considers my findings in relation to my Research Question and sub research questions.

9. Findings from tutor journals

9.1. Outline

I have kept three journals of my thinking, which are:

      1) a Reflective Journal

      2) a Teaching Log

      3) a Reflexive Notebook

The Reflective Journal comprises my thoughts on my own AEL skills development (Listening with Attention, Oral Paraphrasing and Asking Open Questions) since starting my doctoral journey in 2018. In my Reflective Journal, I consider my ideas relating to some of the relevant literature I have read, especially regarding working out my AEL model. I have also used my Reflective Journal to consider my methodological approaches and data collection methods to my study. It has contributed to developing my own approach to IPA as informed by Smith and associates and that of Noon (2018). Indeed, Smith and Osborn (2015:25) state that 'there is no single, definitive way to do IPA'.

My Teaching Log consists of my Scheme of Work, lesson plans and notes taken during and after teaching sessions. Further to this, I have created a framework adapted from Rolfe et al. (2021) and Brookfield's (2017) models to reflect on my Teaching Log after each session (see Table 4-1).

My reflexivity during the interviews and analysis process is documented in my Reflexive Notebook. For example, my thoughts about each participant and difficulties I had with organising transcripts. Extracts of these are included in the noting column of my DA sheets, (explained in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8). In this Chapter, I summarise what I have noted in my Reflective Journal, my Teaching Log and Reflexive Notebook.

9.2. Reflective Journal

At the beginning of my Reflective Journal, I reflected on my noticing of whether I used or others used OP in general conversations. For example, on 13.10.2019 I

wrote, '*sometimes in conversations with X, he stops me and says, 'I'm talking now … but actually I may be OP-ing'.* In an academic skills drop-in session on 27.11.19, I used OP to '*clarify what a student said'*. Similarly, I noted on 10.12.2019 that in EdD sessions, I have found paraphrasing orally what the tutors had just presented or what colleagues said to be helpful too as '*it becomes clearer'*. I have noticed that if I am unclear about a concept, such as 'epistemology', I try to paraphrase what was said. This helps me to contribute, even if I do not understand and am too shy to admit not understanding. I have noticed that OP gives me some time to process the information, share it with others and sometimes the idea becomes clearer in the process of rephrasing a point, or it might show that I have not understood the point or concept. Hence, this might fill a gap in my own understanding if it is then explained in another way by others. In other words, by using OP I might get closer to understanding that concept or point. Furthermore, '*I think some students may have an idea but may be too shy to share it'* and anxious they might be incorrect. This may often be the case for some students previously educated in other countries.

Practising OP contributes to my reflexivity and relates to Schön's (1994) definition of reflection 'in action'. This is important because I could think about what I and others say. Nevertheless, OP is difficult because it is necessary to focus on the person I am conversing with so I was only able note ideas such as those above shortly after the conversations had taken place. Furthermore, I am not a trained counsellor, therapist or coach who would practise AEL, which would take many years of practice. In my Reflective Journal, I also noted how I considered OP and LwA together.

Regarding using IPA in my study, on 18.11.2020 one colleague said, '*Yes, IPA is wishy-washy'*. Therefore, (as mentioned in Chapter 5) I have reflected on the fact that it was only during the analysis about that it was through the process of my approach informed by IPA the epistemological part of my study became clearer for me. Nevertheless, on first reading about IPA I thought it looked like a thorough approach for an EdD. I always found the ideographic element would be useful in that I could consider each participant's data systematically before going on to analysing the next student's data. This was helpful considering there was a large amount of data to organise that the interviews generated.

9.3. Teaching Log

Overall, my Teaching Log highlights the following points about Group D summarised in the table below:

Meeting	Summary of students' talk in main room	Tutor's notes
1	Most said they wanted to join club to learn sg. new and meet people. All except one said they wanted to improve their academic writing.	It was good to spend longer than I had planned at the beginning Asking students to paraphrase what the last student said was good because it meant I did not have to call their names to speak much or intervene
2	'In club breakout rooms, it's a small group so you engage more' 'The OP was important for going forward'	Through careful listening of the students' conversations, I have learned new viewpoints about AEL Why was it important? I need to listen to students more as they make valuable contributions!
3	Listening with Attention 'shows your understanding and empathy and encourages them to keep talking' 'Both listener and speaker are on the same page'.	This matters because… Listening with Attention is 'listening with palatable respect and fascination' in conversations with diverse individuals (Kline, 1999:37).
4	Said they learned that 'engagement and motivation was important to the group' 'Critical analysis is Asking how and why' (then gave an example relating to an assignment)	Asking students to put ideas and example phrases in the chat seems to be useful in engaging students and it is good to do this before I explain. Students discussed that in the breakout room only one student preferred to have cameras off.
5	'Only 1 hour is too short so not enough time in breakout rooms but hasn't diminished the importance of being in the club' 'We learned a lot'	A few sessions overran by about 10 mins. Students reflected positively on the club overall.

Table 9-1 Summary of Teaching Log entry for club sessions with one group

It is important to stress that my log was created from notes taken during club sessions, and because club sessions were not recorded it is likely that I would

have missed some points or misunderstood what students said. As mentioned in the section about ethics (Chapter 6, Section 6.5), a statement regarding this log was added to the slides that I read out to students for consent. Furthermore, the above table is only a summary but may reveal some of the essence of what members said during the club and my thoughts. I found creating the log a useful exercise to reflect on my teaching and what students said about AEL and other aspects of their learning in club meetings.

9.4. Reflexive Notebook

I kept a Reflexive Notebook of my notes during interviews and while working on transcripts and data analysis. During the interviews, I was focused on what students were saying so I was only able to write one or two words occasionally. Therefore, I did most of my reflexive noting when I listened to the interview recordings later. Reflecting on the interviews overall, my impression is that all student participants spoke confidently and were articulate in the English language (that relates to the participant profile in Chapter 6 , Section 6.4).

It was while listening to the recordings and working on the transcripts that I could consider my reflexivity in more depth on what each participant said. I then took further notes of my reflexivity in my Reflexive Notebook. Subsequently, creating the noting column on the data analysis sheets and later writing-up my findings allowed me to reflect further on my findings. For instance, on 25.10.2022 I noted, '*How do I discuss what isn't said or implied - is what isn't said significant?*'. Nizza et al. (2021) and Smith and Nizza (2022) emphasise that depth is required during the IPA write-up process. Here, I am reflecting beyond what is said, which could be interesting, but this is challenging and can risk misinterpretation. Therefore, I am aware that I have reflected more on the written data and not what could potentially be missing.

I considered the interviews and the corresponding data in depth in that I wrote, for example, that I was surprised and impressed that students had continued conversations outside the clubs on WhatsApp, especially given time constraints as mature MSc Nursing students, and that many seem to have used what they had learnt about AEL skills in their professional practice. I realised that online

synchronous SGLCs in the club groups were likely to have helped student participants' academic writing and criticality (which I had not previously thought about), as well as making and deepening friendships in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns for the majority of the participants.

9.5.   Summary

These three journals have helped me reflect on both teaching and the research process. My Reflective Journal was useful in developing my own understanding of AEL skills and the Reflexive Notebook helped me to grasp how IPA would work in practice. It was helpful to return to my Teaching Log taken during club sessions and think about what club members said (which I relate to my IPA informed findings in the next chapter). My Teaching Log suggests that student participants were positive about being in the club and their learning. I found it very interesting that the students were able to extend their learning into their MHN practice, which is something I learned from reflecting on the interviews and had not previously expected. Developing AEL skills in the club in small online synchronous learning groups appears to have been beneficial and important to the student Mental Health nurses interviewed as both an academic and professional communicative skill. In addition, my reflection on the research process may add depth and rigour to my study.

10.   Discussion

10.1.   Outline

In this chapter, I discuss findings from the two semi-structured interviews, ideographic summaries, and club group summaries, as well as my findings from my three tutor journals, which includes links to my literature review. Firstly, in the next section, I have divided the Research Question into some points to provide a detailed and structured account to my answer. Secondly, I consider the effectiveness of the research approach I have adopted informed by IPA, and how I have referred to my tutor journals. Thirdly, I have included a section on how my study might be deemed to be trustworthy. Finally, this chapter culminates with a summary of findings to answer my overall Research Question, a summary considering the effectiveness of my research approach, and a summary of my reflections and reflexivity.

10.2.   Discussion of my Research Question and Sub-questions

This section of my discussion is a reminder of my RQ and sub-questions. I have related the sub-questions to the data and themes arising from the semi-structured interviews that I conducted with student participants.

What are participating university students' lived experiences and perspectives of developing Active Empathic Listening skills practised in online academic conversation clubs in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns?

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1. What do participating students say about their Active Empathic Listening skills development:
   a.   … before attending the clubs?
   b.   … after attending Part 1 of the clubs?
   c.   … after attending Part 2 of the clubs and reflecting on both parts of the club combined?
2. What do participating students say about developing their Active Empathic Listening skills, that was:
   c.   … Easy?
   d.   … Difficult?

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3. In relation to Active Empathic Listening skills development, what do participating students say about their personal learner factors regarding:
   f. Shyness and confidence,
   g. Participation and engagement,
   h. Motivation,
   i. Identity,
   j. First time studying in the UK?

4. What do participating students say about their relationships to other student members in the clubs?

5. What do participating students say about their online synchronous study experiences:
   d. In general
   e. In relation to the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns
   f. Their learning in the clubs?

6. What do participating students say about their development of AEL skills in relation to:
   a. Academic Skills?
   b. The MSc Mental Health Nursing Programme?

Table 10-1 Research sub-questions

~~I have added some points to address my Research Question listed in the table below.~~ ~~These are points arising and interpretated from the university participating students' data.~~

10.2.1. Active Empathic Listening development

It is important to understand participants' prior understanding, knowledge and adoption of AEL skills to see how these were developed during the clubs.

1. What do participating students say about their Active Empathic Listening development:

1.a. … before attending the clubs?

Some participants explained that prior to the club they were specifically lacking in their listening and/or Oral Paraphrasing skills, which the club helped them to notice. It appears that participants had been previously taught about the importance of communication skills on their MHN programme. However, related

to before attending the club, a few members stated that they previously did not have any opportunity to practice AEL or other communication skills in learning sessions on their programme. Effective communication skills are essential in nursing practice, according to the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC, 2023) in the UK and their Standards Code (NMC, 2018). For example, registered nurses in England are required to 'actively listen, recognise and respond to verbal and non-verbal cues', 'check understanding and use clarification techniques' (NMC, 2023:28). These relate to and involve Listening with Attention and Oral Paraphrasing skills within my AEL model.

On some undergraduate programmes, student nurses do receive some practice in AEL skills, including online, which can reduce anxiety among students regarding what to say to patients (Fitzgerald, 2020). In addition, simulation activities and role-play techniques are recognised to be beneficial to improving communication skills by educators in nursing (Underman Boggs, 2023). I was surprised to learn that MSc Mental Health Nursing were not given opportunities to practise communication skills and only had 'bookish knowledge', despite its importance in professional nursing practice and that the clubs I facilitated provided the only possibility to practice essential communication skills during university study blocks.

I have also learned, as noted in my Teaching Log, that participants' development of AEL skills in the clubs was both personally important and significant for all student participants in my study. I had previously questioned whether the clubs would be appropriate for MHN Nursing students and assumed that they would have already developed these skills within their programme sessions. Indeed, my Teaching Log reinforces the point that students were positive about their learning in the club when returning to the main room after breakouts in sessions. For example, participants reflected on their participation and active engagement in relation to their AEL skills development and that the small group size was a factor that may have made engagement easier. This raises the question whether engagement would have been less in a larger group overall and the small size of the breakout rooms set.

Through teaching a similar club in a university Business School, I have found that in a large group it appears to be possible to set breakout rooms through the participating students' and tutors' university's Zoom account for any number of students per breakout room of up to 100 students. The Harvard Division of Continuing Education website (2023) provides some advice about teaching larger groups on Zoom; for example, using the hand raise function. The Website further states that using a teaching assistant is recommended to facilitate learning for large groups. I noted that club members did use the raise hand function in the main room in my Teaching Log.

When the student participants started their courses, the majority stated that they found it difficult to communicate online. However, it appears that they were becoming more confident with OSL by the time the club started in the second year of the pandemic. Indeed, many HE students were reported to have found OSL and communication challenging (Carolan, 2020; Losh, 2021; Calica and Patterson, 2023).

Furthermore, some participants mentioned that they wished the club had been available in their first year. Here, my Group C ideographic summary states;

> 'There was a difference of opinion regarding OSL in that two participants mentioned it had been challenging, one preferred it to in person teaching and another enjoyed overcoming some of the challenges'.

In my Group D ideographic summary I have written; 'Members found online learning in their MSc sessions challenging, especially at first.' These findings suggest that the club was helpful to participating students but would have benefited them more had it been possible to facilitate in their first year. Therefore, learning in the clubs with a focus on AEL skills development was beneficial to student participants, at least to some extent.

AEL development
   1.b. … after attending the first part of the clubs?

After attending the first part of the club findings related to the ten participants suggested that they had learnt more and improved their communication skills, especially AEL skills. Effective communication skills are essential in nursing

practice about which many books have been written for nursing and healthcare students and professionals. For instance, Walker, (2014); Moss (2017) and Underman Boggs (2023). According to Walker (2014) in relation to Mental Health Nursing, communication skills are not instinctive for everyone. Yet, it is essential for students of nursing and other caring professions to practise these. This is stated in the NMC Code of Practice (NMC, 2018). As mentioned in the introduction and explanation of my positioning, AEL is one set of communication skills out of several that nurses are expected to acquire and demonstrate. For example, touch is not included as an AEL skill in the context of my study and online synchronous learning (OSL). Nevertheless, Underman Boggs (2023) states that touch is important in nursing practice with patients and that communication may involve the other four senses too.

Data from the sample reveal that AEL was developed, practised and reflected on in the in the club. Therefore, it was important for participating students to develop nursing skills with colleagues in study sessions and during placements with patients. In this section, I discuss and critically analyse my findings relating to AEL skills (LwA, OP and Asking OQs).

A number of participants explained some of their previous difficulties with listening skills mainly within the context of their nursing practice and general communication linking it to attention and empathy. They explained how they became aware of their listening difficulties during the club that they had not noticed before and were able to improve during the course of the club. Indeed, as one participant explained 'listening is an art'. This implies it takes time to practise.

Similarly, if a skill is described as an art, such as in Erich Fromm's book 'The art of loving' (1957), it is first necessary to notice the difficulty to then be in a position to practise it. Fromm (1957) compares practising love with the practice of medicine or engineering and other skills and professions. For example, those participants in my study who described themselves as talkative characters, who may have been monopolisers, explained that they could listen with more attention after attending the club. Whereas previously these participants realised that they tended to interrupt when others were talking or did not pay enough attention to a speaker, such as noticing that they tended to look at their phone during a

conversation. Therefore, Listening with Attention is very important to oral communication.

AEL skills can be considered in relation to the reciprocal and supportive principles of dialogic teaching in Alexander's (2000) pedagogy, mentioned in my literature review (Chapter 3, Section 3.3). Listening with Attention and Oral Paraphrasing are reciprocal in that it is not possible to paraphrase without having listened to what the previous speaker has said, which I initially considered when reflecting on my own OP in my Reflective Journal. Indeed, Bodie (2022a) highlights the reciprocal nature of AEL. This point also corresponds to my findings in that participants felt they were 'fully involved' when listening, which created a sense of empathy towards other club members that student participants stated they had developed in the clubs. Club members involvement in OSL was therefore significant for engagement in my study. This differs from Moorhouse et al.s' (2023) claim that it is more difficult to maintain HE students' engagement in OSL than in the classroom in their study on Interactional Communication Competence.

According to both Bodie (2011a) and Alexander (2000), listening is described as a cognitive skill in classroom interaction. However, in OSL, Heron et al. (2021) consider the reciprocal dimension of dialogic teaching (adapted from Alexander's work) in which affective learning can be observed. Affective learning was evident in my findings in that students describe the empathic nature of AEL skills, especially in relation to LwA. For example, participants reflected on a previous lack of empathy when online because they were not always listened to, especially when they could see other students not paying attention when cameras were on. They also described how developing LwA enhanced empathy among club members according to my understanding of their perceptions of these skills. Empathy is not mentioned in Heron et al.'s (2021) study in which HE tutors were participants. Yet empathy is important in relation to my Active *Empathic* Listening model and should be considered within the affective dimension.

Together, LwA, OP and asking OQs in my model are important to oral communication in online synchronous learning. Firstly, these skills can be compared with the Oracy Skills Framework and the cognitive and affective dimensions in OSL discussed in Atkins and Herons' (2024) study. My Teaching Log

written during sessions with club members in this study was clear in that members could reflect on using OP in the breakout room on their return to the main room conversation. For example, OP had been employed in the form of questions for checking understanding and club members were able to summarise their conversations too. Checking understanding and summarising are cognitive skills both in-person and in OSL (Atkins and Heron, 2024).

Secondly, the connection between LwA and OP is important, and this is where the reciprocal and social emotional or affective dimension can be seen by the level of understanding between club members not only in terms of what was said but from the empathy that was expressed and felt. For example, 'I tried to listen with empathy' and 'I now know how to demonstrate empathic listening'. In other words, student participants did stress a sense of empathy between them and especially the positive relationships between club members. It appears that they made an effort to empathise with other club members through attentive listening and sensed the empathy from others from the good relationships in the club. Brien et al. (2008) reveal that affective learning was significant from the perspectives of nursing students in the context of in person learning in palliative care, which is important here in the context of nursing education and that it highlights the importance of interpersonal communication between nursing students. Nevertheless, empathy is not considered in Brien et al.'s (2008) article, nor is it mentioned in Heron et al. (2021), Atkins and Heron (2024) or Moorhouse et al's. (2023) studies in OSL. Neither is empathy considered in Alexander (2000) and D'Souza's (2014) research in face-to-face learning.

The affective dimension, in particular empathy, is evidence that my model of Active Empathic Listening skills can work in the OSL context. Furthermore, Bodie (2011a) stresses the emotional involvement, which relates to support and empathy and the supportive nature of oral paraphrasing (Bodie et al. 2016).
Asking OQs can be noticed in Part 2 of the clubs in relation to preparing to create the Podcasts but this was not mentioned in as much detail as the other skills, which was probably due to limited possibility to practice it. However, despite a lack of evidence in my findings, asking OQs is likely to be a cognitive skill that can be related to the cumulative dimension as described in Heron et al's. (2021) research.

My AEL model (Venn diagram) illustrates the connections between LwA, OP and asking OQs. The term 'empathy' within AEL is significant according to my findings described above. Weger et al. (2014) do not mention empathy in their article in relation to their model of Active Listening. Furthermore, their model is considered within the context of classroom interaction only, rather than OSL.

In HE and children's education, Heron et al. (2023b) maintain that the combination of both listening and speaking, 'oracy', has been overlooked with more focus and research being placed on literacy. Indeed, lack of oracy can be attributed to general 'educational disadvantage' and should be addressed by educators and policy makers (Heron et al., 2023b:64). In comparison with my findings, Oral Paraphrasing can be related to the speaking aspect of oracy and is therefore an important skill.

Participants provided details of how OP benefitted them and how it was important to their learning development. For example, a considerable number stated that they found the expressions presented and practised in the club useful. Relating to using OP expressions such as, 'So what you are saying … ', McCormack and Watkin's (2009:32) course book for HE speakers of other languages explains the following:

> 'Listening is also an important aspect of participating in a discussion. You need to listen because your ideas may be influenced by what other students say. An important aspect of listening actively is checking you have understood correctly and showing when you do not understand. As a speaker, you need to make sure that people have understood you.'

Indeed, such expressions clarify and check understanding. This is essential in education, healthcare communication, as well as in other fields, such as management and engineering because such expressions can avoid misunderstanding. For example, Whitcomb and Whitcomb (2013) have provided a guide of similar expressions in workplace communication for engineers. It is particularly important to check understanding in online learning, especially when cameras are off or not working. In addition, in intercultural communication in HE, aspects of language, such as meaning and pronunciation can be misunderstood. In addition, non-verbal language may also cause misunderstanding across cultures.

> 'Facial expressions vary in both frequency and context from culture to culture. For instance, in Asian culture, individuals tend to display frequent smiling behaviour, which serves as a means of conveying not only positive emotions but also negative ones such as remorse' (Vishwakarma, 2023).

OP is therefore a beneficial skill which may prevent verbal and non-verbal misunderstandings in various contexts, including in HE SGLCs. This is reinforced in my study where participants acknowledged the importance of OP and that it can reflect one's involvement and attention to others. A few participants found that OP is beneficial to avoid being judgemental.

In relation to interactional competence in OSL, Moorhouse et al. (2023) claim that OP can be considered as a skill which can shape learner contributions. However, in their explanation OP is directed by a teacher rather than within a small group learning conversation between students in my study. In collaborative study skills in HE, Cottrell (2019) recommends asking to check understanding in case someone has been distracted. Similarly, in this study two participants explained how OP was helpful to them in instances of mind wondering. In my Reflective Journal, I have noted my own awareness that my mind may wonder during a conversation. I have realised that avoiding mind wondering in a conversation takes practice.

Finally, related to Part 1 of the club, my findings and discussion suggest that participants considered both Listening with Attention and Oral Paraphrasing to be beneficial in their studies and placement practice. Asking Open Questions was not practised until Part 2. In my findings and discussion of AEL skills, AEL skills can be described as cognitive and especially affective dimensions of learning. They are cognitive in relation to the mental learning processes and affective because of the positive relationships established in the clubs. Participants appear to have benefitted from developing these skills in that they tried to empathise with others when listening with attention and could also perceive a sense of empathy from paraphrasing back orally what their peers had said.

AEL development

1.c. … after attending the second part of the clubs and reflecting on both parts of the club combined?

After attending Part 2 of the club and reflecting on both parts of the club combined, participants explained that Part 2 had helped to polish their LwA and OP skills (also expressed as communication skills in general in the data). Part 2 provided further practical development in AEL skills, including initial practice of Asking OQs to elaborate on what is said in a learning conversation. Part 2 was beneficial to student participants and helped to consolidate participating students' development of AEL skills. It is likely that OP allowed for initial elaboration and that Asking OQs helped further elaboration, which is important to critical thinking in HE. The data does not appear to explain how OP and Asking OQs may have worked for student participants. Machi's findings (2018) suggest that that paraphrasing can reinforce or add to what has been said. Both Machi (2018) and Bodie et al.'s (2016) research articles state that oral paraphrasing supports others in a conversation. Nevertheless, OP does appear have been conducive to learning in the clubs.

Oral Paraphrasing was beneficial in helping club members write assignments because paraphrasing may have helped mentally paraphrase, as well as consolidate learning by first orally paraphrasing what they had learnt before writing about it. In other words, oral paraphrasing with other students may be a stepping stone to paraphrasing writing. OP may be considered as an academic skill itself, which I discuss further in the academic skills Section 0 of this chapter.

Furthermore, the Part 2 club group revealed that OP was an effective communication skill that can be used with service users and during 'feedback' of patients and other healthcare professionals messages. Feedback is not easy to define because it has different meanings in Nursing and in Education. In nursing, OP and feedback are similar. OP can be defined as 'a response used to check whether a nurse's translation of the patient's words represent an accurate interpretation of the message' (Underman Boggs, 2023:69). Whereas feedback can be a response to a question, verbal message or non-verbal behaviour, as well as showing understanding of what was said that may include reflecting back what was said (Underman Boggs, 2023). Indeed, two participants occasionally used the term 'feedback' rather than 'Oral Paraphrasing'. It therefore appears that in nurse-patient relations the concept of OP and feedback can overlap.

To answer the first point about my RQ about participants' experiences of AEL before, during and after the club sessions, findings highlight that OP and LwA were the most important aspects of AEL learnt in the clubs. This may be partly because there was not enough time to practise and consider Asking Open Questions in depth. Participants were able to employ OP and listening skills (within my AEL model) in synchronous online learning, academic writing, as well as with service users and in general communication. Findings suggest that participating students LwA and OP beneficial for learning in groups and in their practice placements.

Finally, the club was beneficial for participating students to consider, practise and reflect on AEL in both Part 1 and Part 2. It is significant that AEL was helpful in participants' small group learning conversations, as well as in their professional practice. I had not expected that participating students would have used AEL skills much beyond the club group sessions being that they were under considerable time pressure.

10.2.2. Easy and difficult aspects of Active Empathic Listening

2.a. What do participating students say was *easy* about the Active Empathic Listening skills that were presented and practised in the club?

Participants found learning and practising AEL easy but several emphasised that it takes time and practice. In other words, the concept was relatively easy to grasp for these Mental Health student nurses but developing these skills required several sessions of practice and reflection to improve. Indeed, one participant stated that it was in the second part of the club that AEL was 'polished'.

In addition, students in my study stated or implied that the way AEL skills were facilitated in the club may have meant that it was relatively easy to acquire AEL skills. Nevertheless, some participants said it needs patience and practice for the student to develop AEL skills effectively. My Teaching Log extracts suggest that participants' reflections on AEL practice after breakout rooms in the main room may have been a factor. Indeed, I have noticed how my own AEL skills have developed since starting my EdD. For example, I am able to focus better on what

is being said and the person and now become less distracted when a student or colleague is speaking, including online. However, I still need more practice in this.

It is significant that students had prior knowledge of communication skills taught on their MSc Pre-registration Mental Health Nursing Programme with practical skills being developed on placements. Placements make up approximately 50% of a Pre-registration Nursing student's BSc or MSc training time in the UK according to the NMC (2023). Practising AEL skills in the club sessions was therefore important for participants' development of communication skills in nursing, which are vital skills for professional nurses.

2.b. What do participating students say was *difficult* about the Active Empathic Listening skills that were presented and practised in the club?

As mentioned in the above sub-section, data from interviews and my Teaching Log suggest that participating students found the concept of AEL easy to grasp but that AEL skills can require some practice and patience. This implies that AEL skills can be mastered but over a period of time.

One participant was critical of a student who joined the club near the end for one session only. In online learning, Pethig et al. (2023) state that when text messages and online posts are used to communicate, the online community tends to have difficulties to retain the newcomer. Possibly the newcomer in the club had missed much of the AEL work to be able to join in some of the conversation in the session. On the other hand, the longer attending student did not mention whether she had tried to help the newcomer employ AEL skills in the breakout room. In addition, the longer attending members had had more practice in AEL and had built up relationships within the club together before the newcomer arrived.

To answer this sub question, whether AEL was easy or difficult for participants, it appears that participants found AEL in the online club generally easy and there were few difficulties. Several participants praised the way the club was facilitated, which is likely to have influenced learning and practising AEL over the course of the club sessions. My findings explain that AEL had been important and beneficial to their learning as Mental Health nurses and that they not only practised and found AEL useful in the online synchronous club sessions but continued to think,

discuss and employ these skills in their WhatsApp groups outside the club, other learning sessions and in their placement practice. I had previously not anticipated that AEL would extend beyond student interaction in the clubs or possibly in other teaching sessions.

10.2.3. Active Empathic Listening and Personal Learner Factors

In relation to the Active Empathic Listening skills that were presented and practised in the club, what do participating students say about their personal learner factors?

3.a. Shyness and Confidence

Findings suggest that those participants who said they used to feel shy stated they were more confident by the end of the club sessions and that using AEL seems to have helped boost their confidence, especially compared with their first year nursing studies online. Findings also suggest participants were more confident in online synchronous communication when talking about their nursing studies. One of the members who described himself as being 'shy' expressed his feeling of being able to concentrate better on what was said.

Online learner anxiety appears to be quite commonplace and can be associated with a person's general tendency to be anxious when online, as well as being fearful of communication with others, including possible experience of discomfort about how online learning is facilitated (Ritzhaupt et al., 2022). Furthermore, less possibility to develop oral communication skills among nursing students during the pandemic has been acknowledged to have been challenging for many students (Wittenberg et al., 2021), so therefore, developing AEL skills was helpful to overcome anxiety in OSL due to the additional practice that participating students had in the clubs. My perception of the data about online learning anxiety does not seem to imply that student participants in my study had experienced mental health issues arising from anxiety when learning online. It appears that by the time of their second year, most participating students had learnt the necessary skills for learning and communicating online and that the club was helpful to reduce any anxiety relating to online learning and communication that may have continued into the second year for some of them.

Furthermore, my findings regarding shyness may be considered compared with McCroskey and Baer's work (1995) on shyness which explains a person may be willing to communicate despite appearing to be or feeling shy. Nevertheless, McCroskey and Baer (1995) do not consider cultural perspectives of shyness. As mentioned in earlier chapters, shyness is often seen as a positive attribute and mark of respect in the classroom in Thailand (Pattapong, 2010), Iran (Mohammadian, 2013), and Japan (2018), for example, but often less so in the UK and US (Ollin, 2008). This is interesting compared with Machi's (2018) research on OP, where OP appears to be quite common to show respect between friends in general conversations in Japan. Possibly, oral paraphrasing helped student participants in my study to gain respect towards each other, which may have helped them form friendships, similar to Machi's (2018) findings.

As mentioned in my Reflective Journal (see Chapter 9, Section 9.4), I have noticed a connection between my own shyness in my previous education and even in EdD sessions. OP has also helped me both in online and in-person EdD sessions when I have been shy to admit not being able to understand new concepts when in a small group. (I often think others understand what I haven't understood).

Further to this it is interesting to compare my unpublished formative small-scale project (Fromm, 2019) conducted in 2019 with my 2021-2022 main study findings. Ethics approval and programme leader permission was received [Ethics Protocol Certificate Number aHU/SF/UH/020301(2)]. Findings from my questionnaire of a mix of closed 5 Point Likert Scale type questions and open questions for my small-scale project, conducted among 36 international Pre-Sessional English (PSE) students, who I had taught in listening and speaking classes on two PSE Programmes between October 2018 and September 2019 in separate cohorts at a university in England suggest the following eight points. PSE student participants:

1. Students used adjectives such as 'anxious' and 'worried' to describe their feelings relating to a question about what 'shyness' meant
2. Were most shy about making errors
3. Several participants explained that this is to avoid feeling embarrassed in case what they wanted to say might be wrong, as well as fear about making errors in English, a foreign language (as stated in my introduction)
4. Quite shy about asking whether other students had understood them

5. Felt more confident since starting the PSE programme because of the general speaking practice on the programme
6. A few participants felt more conversation practice would have been beneficial on the Programme
7. Postgraduates (n=15) appeared more confident than undergraduates (n=21).
8. AEL skills were only tentatively suggested (but were only taught and practised for about 30 minutes within 5 three-hour sessions).

These findings from my small-scale PSE project are similar to my main study findings in that the some of the same adjectives were used by participants to describe their shyness, other than 'shy'. In my main study interviews, I did not ask about shyness, to avoid leading questions, but in my small-scale study I did, shyness being the focus of my questionnaire. Most students in both the PSE project and my main study suggest that they were shy to some extent. Nevertheless, in a quantitative study about shyness that aims to define shyness, McCroskey and Richmond (1992) reveal that shyness appears difficult to define and measure.

What is significant is that my small-scale project of PSE student participants, is that findings suggest more practice in oral communication on their PSE programme would have been beneficial and that my main study club student participants suggested more AEL skills would have been helpful to their communication skills development in their MHN Nursing Programme content sessions. Research by Heron (2019), Heron (2023), Heron et al. (2023a) and Heron et al. (2023b), highlights the importance of listening and speaking in HE and suggests more practice of these skills is needed in seminars. Here, Heron and associates' work appears to focus on oral skills between tutors and students more than between student peers, yet the point about the need to practice oral communication skills is very important. What is more, practice in oral communication in general appears to boost confidence in speaking in small group learning conversations and seminar type sessions in HE. Heron et al. (2023a) emphasise the need for tutors to facilitate HE learning with more focus on oral communication rather than the tendency to prioritise written communication over and above oral communication. This would be particularly important in nursing

where oral communication is so important to nurses' professional development and practice.

In relation to reluctance to ask questions and consideration of Black students' challenges, mentioned in Chapter 2, it is suggested that Black students in the UK can be reluctant to ask for help, which is likely to be due to previous experiences of discrimination (Mimirinis et al., 2022). Furthermore, it is interesting to speculate that the student participants in my study may have had similar experiences of discrimination in the past other than what was said in the interviews. My impression of the clubs is that all club participants in both parts of the club, including those not interviewed, who were mainly Black and included a few white and students and one student from the Middle East, seemed to me to be confident to ask questions in club sessions. Four participants mentioned they had indeed asked questions in conversations in the breakout rooms or main room in the club, which implies to me that those participants felt confident to ask in both the smaller and whole group situations.

Furthermore, those student participants who described themselves as very talkative in their club groups and in their MSc MHN Programme noticed their tendency to interrupt others in learning conversations, including in online synchronous communication, when attending the club. What is more findings suggest that these talkative, or monopolising students, found that the focus on AEL skills in the club was helpful for them to listen more and talk less. This is likely to have been significant to relationships in the club groups in that talkative the monopolising or more talkative students were then less likely to have talked over others that could have allowed shyer or quieter students more opportunities to actively participate in learning conversations.

To answer the shyness and confidence points relating to my Research Question, it is likely that practising AEL skills in the club did help students who considered themselves as shy and that, as a result, they felt more confident in small group learning conversations. Nevertheless, perspectives about shyness vary considerably from person to person and across cultures, where shyness can be regarded as a positive or negative attribute by some people. There is a dearth of literature about shyness and confidence of Black students studying in the UK. In

relation to shy and monopolising students in the clubs, it appears that the more monopolising types of students listened more which allowed for more overall active participation of all students in club sessions that may have also contributed to the good relationships between them.

3.b. Participation and Engagement

The terms 'participation' and 'engagement' were mentioned interchangeably in the interview data. Definitions of these terms can vary in HE literature too. For example, Littlewood (2009) considers active participation to mean peer interaction in HE classrooms in China, Hong Kong and Singapore. When learning is considered within an interactive and socially constructed framework (Walsh, 2014), it seems that interaction, participation and engagement can have the same meaning.

As reviewed and quoted in my literature review (Chapter 3, Section 4), I have found Martin and Borup's (2022) definition of engagement in online synchronous learning to be relevant to the context of my study. It is important that they state that learner engagement can be regarded on three dimensions; 'affective', 'cognitive' and 'behavioural'. As part of a conference presentation on the theme of engagement in London in June 2023, I discussed affective, cognitive and behavioural dimensions and frameworks together with data from my study summarised in the following slide (Fromm, 2023b):

Discussion

- 3 dimensions of engagement- words from quotes may indicate engagement:

- Affective e.g. confidence, made friends, shared views
- Cognitive e.g. understand, pay attention, learned from each other
- Behavioural e.g. participated, contributed, put cameras on

- *But can facilitating AEL online foster good relationships or do good relationships help AEL to be successful?*

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Slide 10-1 Discussion of my EdD findings in relation to engagement, City University, London, conference (2023a)

Here, I have found some words in my participant data that may be considered within each dimension. For example, 'confidence' is affective, which Atkins and Heron (2024) maintain in HE foreign language learning in OSL; 'understanding' is cognitive; 'participated' can be considered as behaviour, hence in relation to what participating students who used this word said that they did. The question, at the bottom of the above slide that I ask, is difficult to answer based on such a small sample in my study. However, Bodie's (2011b) research maintains empathy can be felt in a group in which members practise AEL. Group members who feel others' empathy can then gain a sense of good relationships. Therefore, facilitating AEL skills can foster good relationships and engage students in OSL.

Martin and Borup (2022) describe how the affective, cognitive and behavioural dimensions should each be considered within the following five frameworks: communication, interaction, presence, collaboration and community. This is interesting in relation to Zhang et al.'s (2023) work on Community of Inquiry in synchronous online learning with respect to cognitive presence, social presence, teaching presence and self-evaluated performance, as reviewed in the literature on online learning in Chapter 4 (see Section 4.2), and, especially social presence. Each of the frameworks relate to social presence in that they are social actions

that can be experienced by students in and online synchronous environment. For example, students communicating when listening and speaking with each other in a breakout room can be an indication that students are engaged in learning. Engagement in small group learning conversations is also likely to lead to a sense of community and belonging.

As discussed in Chapter 8, Section 8.1.5, engagement and confidence are related in that one participant explained he felt the trusting relationships established in the club had helped him to be confident to engage with other club members. As mentioned in Chapter 8, Section 8.1.5, some participants specifically explained that active participation in their online learning conversations can be achieved through Oral Paraphrasing. This is significant to my study because it implies practising OP benefitted learner engagement in the club. It is currently of relevance because of apparent disengagement of some students, who are categorised within certain demographics that has been reported in HE in England since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (Bradbury and van Nieuwerburgh, 2023). These groups include Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and other Widening Participation students, such as commuter students, those who are first in family to study at university and those who have to work in paid employment (Bradbury and van Nieuwerburgh, 2023; Jones et al., 2023).

Unexplained awarding gaps between underrepresented and white privileged students from affluent areas have been discussed in connection with engagement and poor graduate outcomes (de Sousa and St John, 2021). Employing an IPA approach, Bradbury and van Nieuwerburgh's study (2023) is significant in that they state the following related to six postgraduate minority students studying Business at a London university during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, who considered themselves as 'engaged':

> 'Positive relationships were at the heart of all participants' experiences of engagement. Relationships with both lecturers and student peers were delivering practical and emotional support, as well as recognition and self-validation. They were also creating a sense of belonging and promoting the feeling that their presence made a difference' (Bradbury and van Nieuwerburgh (2023:54).

Although limited to students who state they are already engaged, there is a correlation between engagement, positive relationships and belonging in the

above quotation. In an action research postgraduate project with a tutor facilitator in which student group members, including international students, are 'treated as equals' a collaborative approach has been seen as key to harnessing a positive learning environment (Bovill, 2009). Good peer relationships, as well as positive relationships between students and their tutors are beneficial to learning satisfaction and positive outcomes in HE (Bovill, 2009; Bovill, 2020).

Therefore, there are connections between the personal learner factors and relationships, belonging, confidence and engagement.

3.c. Motivation

Student participants were clearly intrinsically motivated to volunteer to join the club, as well as to devote additional time to stay in the club. Despite being in their final year of an intense MHN programme, in which approximately 50% of this pre-registration programme was spent on placement, they still found the time to attend the club. Furthermore, these students were all aged over 30 and most had family commitments. Given the challenges of an intensive course including long placement shifts and placement blocks that took approximately 50% of their time as students, the need for paid employment and family commitments, participants in my study were clearly highly motivated. As mentioned in Chapter 2, in addition to challenges posed by the pandemic, interruptions to study due to family responsibilities and the financial need to be in paid work exacerbated stress on nursing students' time and wellbeing at the time (Calica and Paterson, 2023).

Indeed, some participants mentioned not having enough time to study because of the need to work in paid employment. An important finding of 656 students in London reveals Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students were reported to be more affected by financial hardship and loneliness during the pandemic than White students (Schochet et al., 2023). Loneliness is reflected in my study in the ideographic summaries and Group summaries for both Groups C and D, and my Reflexive Notebook taken during the interviews. My summaries and Reflexive notebook acknowledge that participating students did report that they suffered stress in their first year but less so in their second and that they seemed to be relatively at ease when attending club sessions. Furthermore, the two participants

who attended in 2020-2021 tried to encourage their colleagues to join club groups in 2021-2022. The Podcast created, recorded and then circulated in the School can be used for encouraging more students to join similar clubs in future.

Some participants mentioned meeting on WhatsApp outside club sessions to further discuss ideas and socialise. Their motivation is likely to have had a positive effect on the success of the club that seems to have helped the club students to inspire each other.

3.d. Identity

Two participants talked about cultural misunderstandings related to their identity, being Black, in placements. As included in the Group C Summary, 'the two female students felt they could more easily identify with other people since attending the club' (See Appendix 5). It is reassuring to me that these two club members explained how they felt more comfortable contributing to learning conversations and in placements since attending the club, especially given their previous discomfort in placements. This relates to the challenges I have described in Chapter 2 that have been reported concerning some African students studying in England (Alloh et al., 2018; Owusu-Kwateng, 2021; Mimirinis et al., 2022).

Other participants in the club did not mention difficulties relating to their identity as Black African students in England. It is not clear from the interview data whether a link to a set of cards about equality, diversity and inclusivity (EDI), developed by Clark et al. (2024) at the University of Hertfordshire, included on club session slides was significant to students' sense of inclusion in the clubs. In addition, near the beginning of some sessions I added a photo of Black or Asian role models (for example, the slide showing Nelson Mandela), as part of an introductory 'warm up' activity in those sessions. This was to encourage some intercultural conversation as an initial talking point (See selection of slides Chapter 4, Section 4.7). EDI was mentioned in the first teaching session. It was exciting when participating students (and I) learned that one club member had met the late President that led to further conversation.

These warm-up activities may have contributed to a sense of belonging and inclusion for the Black participants. There is no evidence disclosed in either the interview data or tutor researcher journals, such as my session teaching notes,

that any participant felt discomfort during online club meetings. Nevertheless, there may be bias on my part in how I interpreted these conversations in sessions and the interviews, especially given my positioning that I am white and was their tutor.

3.e. First time studying in the UK

A few participants mentioned they had found adapting to a different education system challenging. Indeed, all participants completed their primary, secondary education, as well as their first degrees in Nigeria or Ghana. Three arrived in the UK to start their MSc in MHN in 2020, while the others had already been living in the UK for many years. Despite having already been on the MHN programme for a year when the club started, some participants revealed the club was helpful with respect to adapting to the UK higher education system.

In relation to the above paragraph, acculturation, or becoming accustomed to a new culture, as well as difficulties adapting to a new educational environment and system can be a challenge for many international students. These factors are described in a qualitative study of 17 international students in the Netherlands, in which 12 were postgraduates, where three factors were identified to affect acculturation as follows:

> 'First, there are personal factors, which reflect participants' past or current experiences and individual perceptions.
> Second, there are social factors, which emerged as a result of social contacts with others at the university.
> Third, there are academic factors, which are linked with academic activities, academic personnel, or academic processes at the university' (Aladegbaiye et al., 2022, no page).

These factors are significant because it appears to be difficult to generalise about international students or those who then transition to a new educational environment. Nevertheless, transitioning into a new culture can be difficult for many international students or those previously educated in other countries.

Not having studied for many years was also challenging for some participants in my study too.

In summary, data suggests that the personal learner factors discussed in this section seemed to be interrelated. These factors could have inspired participating students in the club to engage and learn. Personal learner factors reflect social presence in online synchronous learning, which can benefit relationships and a sense of community. Mental Health issues did not appear to be among the personal learner factors in the data, other than in conjunction with online learning anxiety and initial difficulties participants experienced in the first year of their studies that began in a Lockdown. This is of note since the participating students were MSc Mental Health student nurses interested in the topic of Mental Health and mental health issues are reported to have continued in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns in 2021 - 2022 in other research, for example in relation to postgraduates in Wales (King, 2022).

10.2.4.   Relationships in the club

3.   What do participating students say about their relationships to other student members in the clubs?

In my study, student nurses explained that they were able to communicate well due to the close relationships that developed between club members. For example, one student used the expression 'inner circle'. Indeed, good relationships between students are very important in HE as Bovill (2020) and Gravett and Winstone (2022) maintain. It is important to note that Gordon's (1951) work on AEL emphasises how AEL can foster good relationships between members of a group, as explained in Chapter 3. Moreover, findings reveal that there were good relationships between members in the clubs. It is possible that developing AEL skills contributed to creating these relationships. For example, in comparison with other classes participants claimed they could 'share more views, were able to understand each other more' and that the OP was important for this.

Participants' data reveals how they enjoyed positive relationships in the club, some becoming close, which did not appear to be dependent on whether they had or had not met before. Developing good relationships was an important aim of the club in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns that appears to have been achieved. For example, one student participant stated the importance of the good

relationships in the club for her and described how after attending the clubs she was more confident in having conversations with other groups as a Black person.

In connection with my findings, which suggest that peer relations were positive in the clubs it is interesting to discuss the connection between good relationships and social learning. Felten and Lambert (2020) maintain that positive peer relationships can influence undergraduates' learning and their learning environment, as well as learning from each other, which can arise from just one well-timed conversation that subsequently may positively affect students and their learning success. Furthermore, Felten and Lambert (2020) state that a 'relationship rich' pedagogy can be positive for relationships between students and between tutors and students that should cross cultures, which must extend to Black and Asian students who tend to be marginalised in education and society in both the UK and US. In my study, good relationships between Black club student participants were key to their success and enjoyment in the clubs.

Relationships in the club, motivation and engagement are converging themes. This is because it appears these students saw the social, academic and professional benefits of meeting together within and outside club meetings and probably inspired each other. In my Reflexive Notebook taken during the interviews, I have added 'speaks in an enthusiastic tone' and other similar comments. Only one student said the club was just 'okay' at the beginning of her interview, yet I had noted 'might have a cold'. Later in the interview the same participant said the Oral Paraphrasing was 'absolutely brilliant'.

Similarly, my findings from the interviews suggest more perceived motivation and engagement that may have been true for participants which may not have occurred if there had not been good relationships in the club. For example, participants said AEL skills were helpful to engage club members in small groups and improve their social skills. These social skills may have contributed to the good relationships in the club. Wald and Harland (2022) consider interpersonal peer relationships and social learning together with Vygotsky's theories. It is interesting that they point out Vygotsky's concept of the 'more capable peer' to scaffold learning in large HE classes where peer learning in small groups or pairs is known to benefit. In a pilot research project that I conducted in 2016 among

international Pre-Sessional English students and students studying a foreign language in the UK, many students did not appear to intermingle with other students outside class to benefit their language learning from each other (Fromm, 2018).

Research from Dublin City University reports a lack of communication between different nationality students at university (Dunne, 2009), yet in Florida it has been suggested that those students who report higher levels of social integration generally achieve better in their studies (Massi et al., 2012). Facilitating AEL skills contributed to good relationships, however, it would be interesting for tutors to facilitate AEL skills across different backgrounds with more student groups in future. Since the idea of AEL is largely based on showing attention to others, which can encourage understanding, warmth and positive relationships, then facilitating AEL in HE peer group learning is likely to lead to beneficial outcomes.

In my Reflective Journal I have written about how my own confidence in learning was boosted and grades improved possibly because of the friendships I made as an undergraduate at university, including international ones. To that point, I added in my journal that previously at the first secondary school I attended, I had failed end of year exams possibly due to having been bullied by some pupils and prejudice I had experienced from a few of the teachers as a minority student in the school. 'We conclude that high-quality interpersonal relationships in students' lives contribute to their academic motivation, engagement, and achievement' (Martin and Dowson, 2009: final para.).

Furthermore, participants in my study stated that they did not only form good relationships to other club members, but importantly, close friendships. Friendship is important to the concepts of belonging and mattering (Gravett, 2023; de Sousa, 2023). In HE, de Sousa (2023) defines belonging as having a 'sense of fitting in' and feeling safe and trusted among others in the institution.
On a conference slide (de Sousa, 2023), mattering is explained as:

> - Feeling cared about, considered, valued, feel that you count, missed if not there, makes you feel energised and engaged
>
> - Not mattering = voice not heard, not noticed when missing, invisible, insignificant, disrespected

Slide 10-2 de Sousa, S. Definition of mattering on a University of Hertfordshire Conference slide

In her book, Gravett (2023: 1) defines mattering as 'how we feel we feel we are valued by others.' Furthermore, Gravett (2023) explains that mattering can extend beyond personal interactions.

> 'What is involved in the relationship, what matters, what is entangled within the learning interaction expands to include tools, objects and spaces, meaning that students and teachers are viewed as situated and entangled within complex and messy networks of the everyday' (Gravett, 2023: 14).

The idea of creating 'safe spaces' in the online learning environment is relevant to transitions and belonging. Holley and Steiner's (2005) research emphasises the importance of creating 'psychologically safe spaces' in the learning environment, which might help to reduce learner anxiety of feeling embarrassed of making errors. Moreover, in my Reflective Journal I have noted, 'Fear may include discomfort because of gender, nationality, skin colour, background or other prejudice students may suffer or have experienced in the past'. This point also relates to my article about newly arrived international students in a Lockdown in 2020 in England who appeared to be isolated and depressed (Fromm, 2022a). Being members of a club, albeit online, may have also contributed to a sense of belonging and mattering for student participants in my study. Indeed, I have reflected on how arranging social events for a university German club was important to me when I was an undergraduate in England and that 30 years later I am still in contact with a few of the friends I made in the German club, who live in Austria.

Finally, in answer to the question about relationships, the positive relationships that the club appears to have afforded participating Mental Health Nursing students in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns appeared to have mattered to this group of very busy but highly motivated and engaged students.

10.2.5.   Online synchronous learning

5.a. What do participating students say about their online synchronous study experiences in general?

My findings suggest a mixed response in relation to students' general online synchronous experiences. Firstly, all except one participant stated or implied that online synchronous learning was hard at first, whereas some said they had become more familiar with it by the time the club started in their second (final) year of study.

Secondly, several stated that they did not enjoy or benefit from online synchronous learning as much as classroom learning and a few mentioned it depended on how the learning was facilitated by individual tutors on their MSc MHN programme. This relates to the literature I cited in Chapter 2 related to online learning challenges for students in that on one hand many students struggled with online learning (Dost et al., 2020; Fromm et al. 2021; Calica and Paterson, 2023), including accessing it (Dost et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2023). For example, students may not have access to the Internet, adequate bandwidth or own a laptop. Technical challenges and initial lack of experience with online learning were issues for some participants in my findings, especially before the club started.

Nevertheless, collaborative learning can be achieved in online synchronous learning (Calder et al. 2021; Fromm et al., 2021). My findings suggest that participating students collaborated in the club breakout rooms, such as when creating the Podcast. They explained in the session and in the interviews how they collaborated through using their AEL skills to produce the recording. The following slide from a conference for colleagues (Fromm, 2022b) illustrates some of my findings in my pilot study, which compare with my main study.

> ## One participant explains …
>
> *"It's [the club] been amazing if you are not someone who wants to speak in class, one time I thought I wasn't understanding something in class [online] and then [in the club] we spoke about it and I thought, wow.*
> *…Yes it really did help a lot of us to make friends.*
> *…And the only way to communicate is through active listening and oral paraphrasing.*
> *…So the listening and oral paraphrasing skills helped us to do the research."*
>
> Anita Fromm 18/11/2022

Slide 10-3 One participant's summary of the 2020-2021 club

As in my pilot study, my main study findings also suggest that participating students found they could communicate by listening actively and paraphrasing orally and that this was probably beneficial for shy students. OSL enabled club students to make friends. In my pilot study they also conducted a mini research project in the sessions (Fromm et al., 2021) and in my main study they planned and created the Podcast. The word 'amazing' in both my studies suggests small group learning conversations in OSL can be enjoyable. Indeed, student satisfaction with online learning depends on individual students' lived experiences of OSL and can relate to how online learning is facilitated, as well as the access available to students and their familiarity with it. In other words, OSL requires adequate access and practice so that students can learn together.

5.b. What do participating students say about their online synchronous study experiences relating to the Covid-19 pandemic?

Relating to the pandemic, a few participants mentioned isolation and challenges of not being able to meet in person. In relation to students in the aftermath of the Covid Lockdowns in my main study, some students have acknowledged that the shift to online learning was the best possibility considering the unprecedented circumstances of not being allowed to socialise in person. It is interesting that

despite the danger to health, a few participants stated that they were inspired to choose to study nursing because of their desire to help others. This shows compassion. In clinical psychotherapy, Professor Paul Gilbert defines compassion as:

> 'Compassion (which is an element of loving kindness) involves being open to the suffering of self and others, in a non-defensive and non-judgemental way. Compassion also involves a desire to relieve suffering …' (P. Gilbert, 2005: 1).

Moreover, in Compassionate-focused Pedagogy in HE among UK students in classroom seminars, compassion Theo Gilbert defines compassion as 'the noticing of distress or disadvantaging of others, and then taking action to reduce this' (Gilbert, 2015:1). AEL appears to be non-judgmental in its focus on listening with attention to others and is likely to convey warmth to others. Nevertheless, in Higher Education a difference between AEL and compassion is that in AEL the original intention of the conversation may be to exchange ideas about learning and hence learn from each other's views reciprocally. Whereas in Compassionate-focused Pedagogy the aim is connected to relieving distress of student members in a group. In AEL it is through the process of listening with attention that empathy is likely to be felt and reciprocated to members in a small group learning conversation. Compassionate and AEL skills, in HE, are similar but appear to differ in some ways. For example, compassionate skills in HE focuses on eye contact or eye gaze and a soothing voice to relieve suffering of students in small group learning conversations whether in person or in online synchronous learning (Gilbert, 2015; Gilbert, 2016; Jayasundara et al., 2022); Jayasundara et al., 2023), whereas AEL skills involve the process of listening with attention, paraphrasing orally and asking open questions with aim of creating closer understanding of others and active participation, that is both listening *and* speaking, in small group learning conversations. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, findings in my study in online synchronous communication suggest that monopolising students noticed that they now listen more and shyer students appeared to be more confident to speak more through developing their AEL skills when talking about lectures and academic texts in the club.

My study, contextualised in online synchronous learning in the club in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns, reveals that Covid-19 did impact students, their

learning and wellbeing during and in the aftermath of the pandemic Lockdowns. Therefore, participating in the clubs seemed to be helpful to alleviate some of the isolation for participating students in my study.

5.c. What do participating students say about their online synchronous study experience in the clubs?

To begin to explore this question, I have referred to the following report on the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) (2022)

Key findings online learning in 2021 2022 - JISC

- Students want blended learning – 45% of students who responded to our survey expressed a preference for a mix of onsite and online learning, not surprising given that 71% were learning from home
- Students perceive that what is currently on offer is of a good standard – 74% rated the quality of online learning on their course as above average
- Student involvement in decisions about their digital experience brings many benefits and there is clearly a willingness from this year's survey respondents to get engaged with 37% saying they were given the chance to be involved in decisions about learning platforms
- Issues around digital and data poverty remain – 63% of respondents experienced one or more problems when learning online and 51% reported having poor Wi-Fi connection. Only 9% were either given or loaned devices or received help to buy equipment that would have supported their learning
- Student perceptions about how engaging and motivating their learning materials were low with just 43% agreeing they were so – highlighting the need for careful consideration of curriculum design

The full report by JISC (2022) gives a detailed analysis of their findings and guidance on how universities could address the issues raised. In the section below, I have compared the report's findings with my own according to the bullet points above, about which I have found similarities.

- It is interesting that the convenience of not having to travel to university seems to reflect what several participants in my study also state was a benefit of online learning in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns.
- A few students in my study mentioned they were satisfied with most of their MSc Programme from the point of view of how online lectures were facilitated, that can be compared to the JISC report (2022) above.

- In club sessions, I said that the club was for them and that I was open for any member to make suggestions about the topics of each session or anything else (as mentioned in Chapter 4). The clubs were run outside of their Programme. I was not part of the Nursing programme itself. Nevertheless, involving students in 'co-creating' curricula with their tutors (Bovill, 2020) has been acknowledged as being important to mattering (Gravett, 2023). Therefore, the point about staff-student partnership that JISC (2023) state may compare to the student-centred type of teaching in the clubs in that I provided choices for members to make decisions, which could be seen as staff-student decision making, despite the clubs being extra-curricular.

- Challenges accessing digital learning was a point barely mentioned in the interviews by participants in my 2021-22 study. However, adapting to online learning and learning about new technology appears to have been challenging for all except one participant. A difficulty with the club related to online learning, as mentioned by several participants, was that it was facilitated in the second year of their studies of the pandemic and participating students suggest that it would have been even more helpful to have been run earlier at a time when participants were less likely to have been accustomed to the technology and practice of online learning. As mentioned in Chapter 2, there were challenges for me to start the club due to difficulties beyond my or programme leads control such as timetabling and placement block changes.

- There appears to be no data related to teaching materials in the interview data. However, from my notes taken during sessions, students seem to have engaged with materials (my Power-Point slides) well. For example, the conversations in breakout rooms and main room about the slide with a photo of Nelson Mandela. Several students praised the teaching in club sessions. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, student engagement is a current issue for many tutors in HE.

One important point, which is not mentioned in relation to the JISC (2023) report above, is that all participating students emphasised the importance of the good relationships between them in the club. This is interesting in relation to the Zhang et al. (2023) Community of Inquiry model, based on Garrison et al.'s (1999)

original model. What is more, social presence in online synchronous learning (Zhang et al., 2023) does appear to have positive effects on peer relationships, which suggests that as in my findings a sense of community seems to have been established among participating students in the clubs for whom communication was facilitated entirely synchronously in an online environment. This point is in line with Jones et al. (2023) about their proposal for community building among new undergraduates in HE, which appears to be the case in my study based on postgraduate students who missed out on socialising in their first year.

In addition, there is a need to reduce deficit models in HE to close awarding gaps between international, minority students and disadvantaged Widening Participation students and white privileged students from affluent backgrounds, as proposed in theses by Gilbert (2015) and Farenga (2019). In relation to their work, my findings suggest that setting up and facilitating AEL skills was helpful to relationships and community building. Here, my findings reveal how two Nigerian female student participants spoke at some length about feeling more confident as Black student nurses in the workplace since attending the club. A male Nigerian student participant mentioned his awareness of different accents in other varieties of English when speaking in groups. My findings are therefore significant in relation to Gilbert (2015) and Farenga's (2019) proposals to reduce deficit models because, in my study, participants appear to have felt a sense of community. A sense of community is known to help reduce deficits and awarding gaps (Jones et al., 2023).

Furthermore, in comparison with Lehtinen et al.'s (2023) article about online synchronous communication, contextualised in HE student education within a social constructivist theoretical framework, the co-construction of knowledge was evident in their study, as well as in both my pilot and main studies. This is evidenced in Lehtinen et al.'s (2023) article in that they considered speaking and the involvement of student participants' critical thinking. Here, the point about the co-construction of knowledge concurs with Marion Heron's article (2019) on oracy skills (listening and speaking) in HE classroom seminars in the UK. This is because listening and speaking (LwA and OP in my study) are important skills for HE and as Heron (2019) states should be considered regardless of students' linguistic

background. Participating students in my study had been previously educated in the English language.

Furthermore, the processes involved in listening and speaking in groups should not be neglected (Heron, 2023; Heron et al., 2023b). I agree with Heron's articles (2019; 2023) that classroom seminar oracy and dialogic skills should be regarded as processes, and thus think AEL skills can also be considered as learning processes. In relation to AEL skills in my study in the online synchronous learning environment, developing AEL skills are part of the process, whereas the product may be the outcome of the skills employed for a particular aim such as students' ability to critically discuss an academic journal article in a small group learning conversation. Indeed, it is during the process of employing AEL skills in an SGLC and talking about journal articles, for example, that closer understanding happens, which can be considered as cognitive skills.

Participating Students' listening and speaking development relates to my aim of developing AEL skills for university students in my club teaching and study in general, as well as in the Podcast activity. Many online synchronous communication interactions between participants were necessary to create the Podcast and were evident from both participant data and in my Teaching Log extracts.

Lack of time for practising open questioning because of timetabling issues, in my teaching was a possible reason that it was not mentioned by participants in my study and therefore we only spent a few minutes talking about and practising this in Part 2. Nevertheless, Asking Open Questions is significant in relation to a dialogic teaching conceptual framework that also requires listening, speaking including open questioning (Heron, 2023). There is a point of evidence in the Podcast transcript that open questioning was used albeit briefly:

> D3: Yasmine, can you please tell us why students should join the online academic conversation club?

Asking Open Questions was taught at the beginning of the second part of the club and thus employed by student participants in first creating the Podcast and then in recording it. Despite the Podcast activity being recorded on Zoom and that the five participating students who continued in the second part of the club worked on

this together in one breakout room, it is important to mention that students did have a few notes to produce the actual recording to avoid false starts and hesitations. Furthermore, the educational technologist may have edited out some false starts and hesitations to produce the final radio broadcast quality Podcast for the School.

Student participants in my study reported that the club enabled them to gain practice in OSL and the application of AEL skills was beneficial to their learning, and relationships. This is despite some student participants reporting difficulties with noticing eye gaze in OSL and thus they needed to listen with more attention when online. Furthermore, in relation to OSL in other research, such as Professor Theo Gilbert's website, *Compassion in Education*, inclusive eye gaze, facial expressions and appropriate language can be beneficial for students who tend appear to be shy, as well as for those who may monopolise in small group learning situations. Employing compassionate skills in groupwork is significant in terms of the neurobiological processes that have been recognised in that compassion involves cognitive action in the noticing of distress (Gilbert, 2017; Gilbert et al., 2018).

One difference between Gilbert's findings and my own relating to OSL may be that when online, a few participants in my study have mentioned that it is difficult to notice eye gaze (in findings from both the interview data and my Teaching Log). This might be because of 'skewed visuality' through a laptop camera lens, which may also increase self-consciousness and could negatively affect relationships (Kaiser et al., 2022). Indeed, Grondin's (2019) article, which I have reviewed in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, also maintains that visibility in online synchronous learning can be an issue for some students in OSL.

Furthermore, through my online synchronous teaching, I have noticed and noted in my Reflective Journal (on 23.2.22) that there might be a difference regards eye gaze and the position of the windows when speaking to a person in a group who may be in a top or bottom window. This is likely to be more of a difficulty in larger groups of students. Eye gaze is discussed regarding the cameras' on and off activity in Chapter 5, Section 5.2. Student participants have noticed and spoken about this in the interviews, which is also is a point that was discussed in the main

room after the activity. Online sound quality can also affect the communication (Grondin et al., 2019). Here, Oral Paraphrasing when online can be an effective skill to overcome visual and sound difficulties in OSL.

In addition, the activity with cameras first on and then off in a club session where students talked about academic texts and practised OP was acknowledged as being helpful by participants in the first part of the club (Interview 1). However, it is not stated in the data whether the cameras on and off activity would help to the same extent or at all in a group where AEL is not practised. This is an interesting point regarding online communication pedagogy. Indeed, Jayasundara et al. (2022) describe how reluctance of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) students in the UK to switch cameras on in OSL can be mitigated using Compassionate-focused Pedagogy (CfP). This is significant in that compassionate skills and AEL skills share similarities but differ because in CfP, skills such as noticing eye gaze and tone of voice relate to psychological motivation and in AEL skills (LwA, OP and Asking OQs), empathy appears to come through the process of student participants use of AEL skills. This relates to Bodie's definition (2011b), discussed in Chapter 3, Section 3.2 in which interactions appear to be 'conscious' for the listener yet 'perceived' by the speaker that subsequently lead to a sense of empathy. Furthermore, it is interesting that of the four participants in my study who talked about the cameras on and off activity in the interviews, three preferred to have cameras on and one explained in the interview and to the group in the main room after a breakout room conversation (which I included in my Teaching Log during that session) that AEL worked better for her with cameras off because it allowed her to concentrate better.

Preparation for the Podcast seems to have helped student participants to reflect on and consolidate their learning in the club. In the interviews, participants explained how they were able to listen and understand different individual perspectives about AEL. Yeh et al. (2021:2850) state that when preparing for a Podcast 'the first step in Podcast production, could be regarded as the process of continual involved self-questioning and self-exploration'. This is significant because many assessments in HE require students to be able to reflect on their learning.

One participant in my study emphasised that preparing and writing the Podcast script and recording was helpful to boost his confidence. All those who took part in the activity appeared to consider it to be a valuable experience. It is significant that Yeh et al. (2021) do state that preparing and creating a Podcast benefits learners' critical thinking skills. In addition, it is likely that 'learning though production' is motivational and can articulate and consolidate the process …' (Laurillard, 2012).

Finally, my findings and discussion in this section suggest that employing AEL skills were beneficial to students participants in an online synchronous learning environment, which can involve student engagement and collaboration in that the process of employing AEL skills seems to be positive for good peer relationships and a sense of belonging to a community in small group learning conversations. In answer to the question about OSL, findings suggest that both parts of the club were helpful towards improving participating students' online synchronous learning experiences.

10.2.6. Academic skills development and learning in nursing

What do participating students say about their development of AEL skills in relation to:
    a. Academic Skills?
    b. The MSc Mental Health Nursing Programme?

The club appears to have been helpful in that participants stated their academic skills had improved and that they had benefitted from the club for five reasons.

Firstly, participants imply that AEL skills seem to have improved participants' perceived self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) defines perceived self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their ability to achieve a particular task that may depend on personal, as well as the influence of cognitive and social learning factors. This is evidenced in the interview data in that, in the interviews, participants talked about how they benefitted from AEL in terms of improving their academic skills (although the extent cannot be measured). For example, in the interview they remembered, without being prompted, that club sessions included conversations about lectures and sections of academic texts selected by club members. Participants explained

that through OP they were more confident in speaking about lectures and texts. Practising OP may refer to cognitive ability to engage in conversations about lectures and texts, as well as reciprocal learning, which is also affective because of a sense of sharing ideas that can lead to a feeling of warmth between members.

Secondly, many participants stated that Oral Paraphrasing practised in the academic conversations in club sessions led them to feel more confident and competent in their academic writing.

Thirdly, Oral Paraphrasing can be an important stepping stone to written paraphrasing and interacting in the conversation can lead to deeper critical thinking. For example:

> 'Academic writing requires writers to engage with relevant scholarship; this means writers draw on significant findings and ideas, with little direct quotation, to support their viewpoint. Summarising and paraphrasing are key skills, skills which academics may tend to assume students will master along the way – and which thus do not have to be taught.' (Coullie, 2020:38).

Furthermore, the ability to paraphrase texts orally in a group or alone in one's mind, and subsequently put what was paraphrased orally into writing is very important to avoid possible plagiarism, which was mentioned by several participants. Hence, is not only an essential communication skill it is important for improving literacy too.

My findings reveal many participants expressed that they had improved their paraphrasing skills in the interviews, which might suggest they were not achieving as well as they would have liked in their written paraphrasing prior to starting the club. These findings correlate with my collaborative article (Fromm et al., 2021:4), which maintains that by using Oral Paraphrasing practised in the club, 'students were able to understand and comprehend lecture subjects covered in online lectures, analyse various research papers, and avoid plagiarism…'.

It is therefore possible that practising paraphrasing first orally and then in writing can contribute to the reduction of academic misconduct when specific paraphrasing sessions are facilitated by a tutor.

In the 2020-21 club group, participants had conducted a project independently in the second part of the online club sessions with minimal tutor guidance. This was

at a time most of the lectures on the MSc MHN programme had been entirely online, especially in the first semester, although there was a mixture of classroom and online learning in the second.

Fourthly, as reported in the findings, the conversations about the texts the students chose to discuss in the club seem to have led to deeper understanding of the texts and hence critical thinking and analysis. Critical thinking is a key skill for students to be able to closely examine and discuss ideas, views and arguments presented in academic texts, lectures and discussion sessions; and subsequently be able to accept or question these and finally present what has been gathered clearly (Cottrell, 2023). By paying close attention when listening to what others say, AEL helps to reflect back and check what has been said to arrive at closer understanding and interpretation of both the text and the students' viewpoint.

This involves engagement and practice. It can be interesting for the student and ultimately should help critical thinking, which members articulated in club sessions and appear to have been able to include in their subsequent written assignments. In other words, facilitating AEL in online academic conversation clubs was beneficial to most, if not all, participants' academic writing and critical thinking, as well as an important communication skill between students, service users and other people.

The case study in my ideographic summary (see Appendix 5) suggests the participating student has developed AEL skills, namely OP and listening with empathy (as the participant called it). He explained that he was able to use these skills with patients in his professional practice that he believes were not practised within the MHN programme. This case study serves as a summarised example of what one participant said in relation to how the skills he practised and developed in the club benefitted him and contributes to answering my research questions in relation to relationships, engagement, motivation and OSL in the club. Developing OP and empathic listening skills were beneficial for him. Furthermore, the group case study (See Appendix 5) is interesting because of the 'social skills' that the four participants in one group gained in the club that can be considered in the affective dimension of learning. This is because social skills, relationships and engagement can work in OSL as discussed earlier in this chapter. What is

important is that active empathic listening (as a participant called it) and OP, which were practised and developed in the club, benefitted student participants' professional practice. This is significant because findings in relation to these four club members suggest that these student participants practised their AEL skills in OSL and in relation to conversations about lectures and texts but could nevertheless employ these skills in their professional nursing practice.

Finally, AEL skills can be seen as academic skills, especially if used in online synchronous conversations when talking about lectures and academic texts. This is significant in relation to my sub-research question about developing academic skills and learning in nursing. Here, I refer to an idiographic summary for one participant as a case study and a group summary.

10.3. Effectiveness of employing an approach informed by IPA

I have found my approach informed by IPA to be an effective, in-depth and reflexive and reflective method to analyse participant data in my study to reveal rich data. My approach is reflexive in relation to considering participant data and reflective in relation to my teaching. The write-up phase contributed to further reflection of my findings later. By further reflection, I mean reflecting back 'on action' as in Schön's (1994) definition. Nevertheless, I found IPA difficult to understand until I had completed the analysis and write-up. I found that the semi-structured interviews were relatively easy to conduct and that my arising findings revealed, not only more data than I expected, but some surprises. For example, student participants extended their small group learning conversations outside the clubs together and into their nursing placements.

In the end, the analysis process enabled me to reduce data into manageable themes. I found numbering the segments of data an effective and practical method, which led to creating the bar charts to obtain a visual representation and an overall view, before continuing the analysis in further depth by going back to the quotes and writing about them to add further depth. Indeed, Smith and Nizza (2022) acknowledge that IPA is a lengthy process. They also maintain that IPA is a reflexive approach. Furthermore, Noon (2018) suggests that interviews need to

be conducted with empathy towards the participants, as previously mentioned in Chapter 6. In a book on 'reflexive methodology', the researcher is advised to consider 'the correspondence of meaning' in the data with and empathic stance, which involves 'checking for authenticity, bias, distance and dependence' (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). In my study, an empathic research approach related to my focus on AEL skills, too, which was reflexive.

My approach to IPA may be unique regarding Active Empathic Listening in that Graham Bodie's and associates' body of work on AEL (Bodie, 2011a; Bodie, 2011b Bodie, 2013; Bodie et al., 2015; Bodie et al., 2016) employs quantitative methods based on an 'Active Empathic Listening Scale' (Bodie, 2011a). The Active Empathic Listening Scale is measured according to a 7-point Likert scale based on participants' questionnaires (Bodie, 2011a). Bodie's quantitative methodology, throughout his work since 2011, does not appear to include much reflexive depth and reveals little about participants' personalities or personal learner factors in his work. Bodie's Active Empathic Listening Scale has also been employed by other researchers in different countries, for example in China (Guo et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the Active Empathic Listening Scale (Bodie, 2011a) suggests that AEL is an effective technique employed in a range of contexts and globally. My approach, using a qualitative methodology, is an effective indicator illustrating that AEL skills in HE online synchronous learning are effective in oral interpersonal communication. Nevertheless, using an approach informed by IPA in my study is limited given the very small number of participants.

10.4. Effectiveness of employing and referring to tutor journals

My tutor journals were used as an additional reflective/reflexive method to IPA, which support some of my findings. For example, the benefit of employing OP to clarify understanding in findings from interview data and in my personal observations of my own use of OP in my journals. I used my Teaching Log as a supplementary source, yet it is important to note not all club groups were included in my Teaching Log because I applied for ethics certification after I had finished teaching Group C, so my teaching log only includes Group D. However, the three journals; Reflective Journal, Teaching Log and Reflexive Notebook, support many interview findings. My tutor journals represent not just reflexive research but also

reflective teaching and pedagogy. Furthermore, IPA is a considerably lengthy analytical procedure. My tutor journals add reflective and reflexive consideration to my findings using an IPA approach. In other words, my tutor journals are a supplementary data source.

The reflective model I used related to a combination of Rolfe et al.'s (2001) and Brookfield's (2017) models in my Teaching Log. My combined model was helpful for me to consider both my teaching and findings with more insight. For example, in my Teaching Log I wrote, 'I wonder about the impact of having old members in the club?'. This question later contributed to my decision to create the emerging theme 'Experiences of Year 1 and Year 2' for the two out of ten participants, who had attended the club in the previous year. Findings relating to one of these students, for instance, reveal that she found the second year more helpful than the first because she could talk to members on the same Nursing programme, namely Mental Health Nursing rather than both MH and Adult Nursing. Therefore, my tutor journals act as a bridge to clarify my findings and support them to some extent.

My tutor journals helped me to reflect on my understanding of what club members said in club sessions that can be related to the findings. For example, when explaining students' understanding of what they thought AEL means, especially Listening with Attention. I noted one participant said, 'participatory non-judgemental listening'. This relates to my discussion in that AEL skills in online synchronous learning seem beneficial to online student engagement, where all ten participants in the first interview and two out of five in the second reveal that they were engaged in the clubs (as illustrated in the bar charts in Chapter 8, Section 8.1). Another example from my Teaching Log, highlights the importance of mutual understanding in the HE learning context, which can lead to developing positive relationships between peers. For example, my findings state 'Both listener and speaker are on the same page'. This corroborates with key findings relating to both AEL skills and relationships too. Similarly, in conversations between HE colleagues, listening with the aim to understand rather than interrupt helps to develop warm relationships and critical friendships (Jarvis and Clark, 2020), which seems to be the same in my study, where student participants reflected in the interviews how they became better listeners and could support rather than

intervene in small group learner conversations. Likewise, this relates to Gordon's chapter (1951) in relation to attending to others in a group.

As evidenced in this chapter and throughout my dissertation, tutor journals were important to my continuous reflection at all stages of my research journey. Moreover, my Teaching Log and the other two journals seem to concur related to my main IPA findings.

10.5. Trustworthiness

I have attempted to make my study trustworthy in that data is rich and substantive. In my study I have employed a research approach using an informed IPA approach and tutor notes through my effort in rigorous scrutiny and interpretation of these. In pedagogical research in HE, Evans et al. (2021) explain that trustworthiness, and rigorous scrutiny are important. Indeed, 'Transparency implies that a great deal of care, reflection, and systematic attention to detail is needed to be involved in the design and the reporting of the research …' (Oancea & Furlong, 2007:128). The following slide summarises my intention to make my IPA approach transparent as explained in a conference presentation to colleagues on my EdD programme in May 2023, which summarises my approach as informed by IPA.

Summary

> IPA is based on the double hermeneutic consideration of the meaning of the participant's lived experience, and interpreting what appears in the data including bracketing

> Transparency is important to illustrate the researcher's working fully; it should show consideration in the attempt to reduce bias

> Transparency can be shown during the analysis process write-up step by step, in discussion esp. relating data to RQ's and how far addressed, and triangulation

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Slide 10-4 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, How can it be transparent?' Fromm (2023a)

My research approach is informed by IPA and tutor journals, which are reflexive/reflective. Alvesson and Sköldberg's book on reflexive methodology (2009), provides an umbrella to reflexive methodology in the active process of the research, and reflection on it. Briefly, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) include four currents, which are related to; firstly, systematic techniques and rigour for processing the data; secondly, interpretative clarification; thirdly, awareness of political-ideological position, and fourthly, reflection of 'representation and authority' reproduced, similarly but within new contexts. In relation to research, reflexivity is considered the 'umbrella term'. Yet according to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) above, reflexivity refers to the researcher's process phase of the data and reflection relates to later consideration of what the data represents. This is similar to Schön's (1994) definition of reflexivity *in* action and refection *on* action. However, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) definition is limited to what the research represents and the researcher's authority of that representation.

While relating these four currents to my study, I have found that IPA represents a systematic and rigorous analytical procedure that allows reflexive/reflective interpretation at different stages. For example, the ideological aspect of IPA and my idea to include individual and group summaries helped me get an overview of the rich data too. Indeed, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) mention that a reflexive/reflective analysis procedure can allow for a double hermeneutic approach that reflects my interpretation of the participants' meaning of their lived experiences in the club. This is important in IPA. Therefore, my study has to illustrated, at least to some extent, a reflexive interpretation of the data in relation to lived experiences of participating students.

In relation to the fourth current, my position does not follow a specific political ideology but what is important to me is that people, such as my club students (and others) matter. This is in relation to Gravett's definition (2023:1) of mattering, explained Section 10.2.4, page 229, 'how we feel we feel we are valued by others.' In other words, mattering was probably significant to relationships in the club and what the ten Black West African student participants said about my teaching and the implication that there was a good rapport between these students and me too. Furthermore, the good relationships between club members, and to me, would have contributed to a sense of belonging in the clubs that helped

the students to be successful, who since gaining their MSc in Mental Health Nursing have all most likely entered into employment as professional nurses. Finally, the tutor journals have helped me to reflect on my position, my own learning journey and teaching in relation to my study and thus corroborates my findings.

10.6. Summary

10.6.1. Summary of findings

In accordance with the Research Question, my findings suggest that participating MSc Mental Health Nursing students have benefitted from developing their AEL skills in the clubs. Indeed, participants have learned how to employ AEL skills in synchronous online learning conversations. This has appeared to have positively impacted their relationships to each other, their attention and confidence in speaking in online synchronous sessions, including their understanding and communication with other colleagues on placements and with service users.

Practising AEL has also helped participants' oral and written academic skills and critical thinking. In addition, participants appeared to have engaged well in the clubs while practising AEL skills and in general conversations with each other that was developed in the clubs. It is not clear to what extent AEL can contribute to and enhance learner engagement or how far good relationships and other personal learner factors make a difference. Nevertheless, my findings do suggest that the AEL skills gained in the clubs were beneficial. Findings correlate with my ideographic and group summaries too, especially in relation to good relationships, which are known to be beneficial to learning, as well as online synchronous learning, community building and mattering.

Difficulties expressed by participants were that AEL skills require practice and patience. In my experience of facilitating AEL skills in the clubs, I think that the concept of AEL is relatively easy to understand but agree with these findings that takes time to be able to use these skills well, especially considering the importance of communication skills in nursing in general. Reflecting on AEL skills after the breakout rooms in the main room was also likely to have been beneficial to the

overall learning of AEL skills, as well as working towards and creating the Podcast. Indeed, AEL is an important academic skill. Oral Paraphrasing, in particular, is an academic skill and stepping stone to written paraphrasing to improve success in student's writing, which can reduce the risk of plagiarism and academic misconduct.

Overall, participants gained from the experience, which outweighed few difficulties.

10.6.2. Summary considering the effectiveness of research approaches

In sum, my approach informed by IPA was robust in that it allowed me to consider participants' data thoroughly and reflexively, which added additional reflective depth to in relation to my teaching approach in my write-up. The ideographic and group summaries were helpful for me to form an overall impression of each of the ten participants and Group C and D in Part 1, as well as in relation to the five participants who continued in Part 2. My tutor journals were helpful to reflect on my whole doctorate journey from beginning to end. These journals appeared to corroborate with my findings. My tutor journals enabled me to reflect in depth on my teaching of AEL skills in the clubs, and my general teaching approach too. In addition, I have reflected on my own development of AEL skills in my learning, teaching and everyday life.

11. Contribution to practice in Education

11.1. Thesis summary

Findings in my study suggest that the Active Empathic Listening skills participating students had developed in the online academic conversation clubs were beneficial to their online synchronous learning experience for the following six reasons.

Firstly, AEL skills in small group online synchronous learning mainly involved Listening with Attention to others and Oral Paraphrasing, which can create empathy, warmth and understanding, and therefore good relationships can be built between group members. Findings suggest and support this point in that Listening with Attention and Oral Paraphrasing skills seem to have helped develop participating students' communication skills in the club. Personal attributes gained, such as empathy, warmth and understanding, appear to have benefitted their studies and placement practice towards their future careers as professional Mental Health nurses. Here, Listening with Attention and Oral Paraphrasing are important in terms of social and affective learning.

Secondly, the possibility of building good relationships with other students was problematic during the pandemic period. This is because of restrictions at the time of being able to meet in-person, which had been reported to be detrimental to learning success for many students because of the isolation experienced by many people in the UK and worldwide. In the club, new friendships were formed and those who already knew each other became closer. This was important to the lived experience for all participants in the club. Indeed, making friends was one of its aims.

Thirdly, AEL skills are helpful in conversations between students in online synchronous breakout rooms through Listening with Attention, Oral Paraphrasing and Asking Open Questions that may engage them in the learning process.
Student engagement is an area of concern for many HE lecturers, especially during and in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns. Findings in this study suggest that student participants engaged in online synchronous learning in the club.

Fourthly, developing AEL skills boosted confidence in online synchronous conversations in that those student participants who thought they were shy or quiet believed practising AEL in the club helped them to speak and contribute more to club learning conversations. Monopolisers or very talkative students revealed that as a result of the AEL practice in the club, they felt that they now listened more attentively to others. This was also important regarding participants' perceived agency as revealed in the data. For example, some students explained that they now felt more confident when communicating in other groups of people regardless of skin colour since attending the club, especially in their practice placements. Attending the club and practising AEL, seemed to matter to them as Black West African students. Awarding gaps between Black and white students (as well as for those grouped into other minority student demographics in the UK, such as those with family commitments) are unfortunately common. Boosting confidence in a group, including in online synchronous learning, was important to participants. The opportunity to take part in creating and recording a Podcast also increased confidence and perceived agency.

Next, in conjunction with discussing Academic Skills in the club, most student participants revealed that AEL, especially Oral Paraphrasing, helped their critical thinking. This is important in terms of developing cognitive learning skills. AEL skills seem to have been helpful for discussing lectures and academic texts in breakout rooms and then summarising learning shared in the main room. It appears that OP may have reinforced, as well as, added to what was said in breakout rooms. In addition, Oral Paraphrasing is likely to have led to an improvement in these students' written paraphrasing and their academic writing, which participating students mention. Data also suggest that these written skills, arising from the Oral Paraphrasing skills developed in the club, appear to have boosted their academic success and reduced plagiarism. Some participants had compared their assessments since attending the club with their prior assessments and could see improvement. Therefore, the Oral Paraphrasing skills gained may have contributed to participants' successful learning outcomes.

Finally, I did not expect that most student club members would have continued to meet, practise and discuss their AEL skills outside club sessions, as well as socialise (albeit rarely in-person) considering restrictions on their time as busy

final year MSc students with work and family commitments. In addition, and unexpected, all participants stated that they seemed to have transferred their AEL skills gained in the club sessions into their nursing practice placements. Findings suggest that through AEL skills student participants believed they had gained helpful and important skills to avoid misunderstandings and to create good relationships with patients and health care professionals. Participating students' AEL skills were developed in an online synchronous environment. On their own accord they then applied those AEL skills to their in-person practice placements.

11.2. Implications

Data analysis suggests that developing and practising Active Empathic Listening skills in the online synchronous clubs was a positive learning experience for the student participants in this study. AEL may have contributed to successful academic outcomes, especially in relation to using OP, which some participants stated was helpful to improve written paraphrasing, avoiding plagiarism and more critical academic writing. AEL skills were beneficial to engagement in online synchronous learning, confidence and valuable friendships in the group, as well as being a set of important communication skills for Pre-registration MSc Mental Health nurses studying at a university in England. This has implications for online learning pedagogy, Mental Health Nursing learning and pedagogy and professional practice, as well as in learning and teaching in HE in general, as explained in the following sub sections.

11.2.1 Implications for online learning pedagogy

I have listed implications arising from the above thesis summary.

- Developing AEL skills within an online synchronous platform is possible for many students
- Given some preparation time, students can discuss lectures and short sections of academic texts of their choice facilitated in an online synchronous environment
- Students can discuss lectures and short sections of texts in breakout rooms and in doing so may practise and develop both their AEL and Academic Skills

- AEL skills in online synchronous learning can be helpful to build closer relationships when learning in similar clubs, small seminar or discussion groups online
- AEL can be facilitated online with a focus on cross-cultural conversation
- Mini research projects for students in small groups is possible online with only minimal tutor involvement in breakout rooms
- AEL can work for many students when cameras are on or off so students can focus on Listening with Attention (In this study the majority of participants preferred to have them on.)
- Facilitating similar clubs or groups on online synchronous platforms, such as Zoom, is likely to provide practice and develop online learning skills for students.

11.2.2. Implications for Nursing pedagogy

- AEL is one set of communication skills that can be developed by nursing students and practised during learning sessions in a club or other small groups
- Facilitating communication skills such as AEL are paramount regarding nursing requirements as stated in NMC guidelines, therefore it is important to facilitate AEL skills (among other communication skills) for nursing students
- AEL skills are an important set of skills for communicating with service users and other health care professionals and should be included in nursing pedagogy
- AEL requires practice and should be practised in learning sessions over time that can also be implemented in placements with further reflection
- A nursing curriculum in the UK, in which AEL skills are included, is also likely to lead to positive outcomes for student nurses given the importance of communication skills in the field. Nursing curricula based on communication skills have been proposed in other countries. For example, Bullington et al. (2019) propose a nursing curriculum in Sweden based on communication skills for student nurses, especially with regard to nursing students who might be fearful to communicate or need to develop their communication skills in nursing. Öztürk and Kaçan (2022) maintain that empathy and

compassion should be integrated in the Nursing curriculum in Turkey, based on their study that shows a positive correlation between empathic and compassionate skills among trainee student nurses.

- Facilitating AEL by tutors is important for nursing students who have very busy schedules, placements and usually have many other commitments too. Therefore, it is advisable to allocate time for developing and practising AEL in timetables

- Allocating time for facilitating AEL skills in small groups by tutors provides opportunities for nursing students to meet. In large cohorts and groups of students, it is possible to create breakout rooms to divide students into small group. In larger groups it is helpful if a second tutor, technologist, staff member or paid student volunteer is available to assist with the technology. Time to meet other students and facilitating AEL skills can create good relationships between peers that is important to learning and the student experience.

11.2.3. Implications for learning and teaching in HE

- Discussing lectures through practising AEL skills can help understanding of what has been presented so it is suggested AEL skills should be facilitated in other HE programmes too

- Discussing short sections of academic texts in small group learning conversations (as practised in the conversation clubs) can help students to engage with a text and discuss these with others. This is an important academic skill that may help to clarify what might be complex to understand

- Oral Paraphrasing can boost confidence in speaking for students who might be shy or quiet when speaking in small seminar groups

- Listening with Attention can help monopoliser or very talkative students to listen more

- Listening with Attention and Oral Paraphrasing can help students to think about what to say by then paraphrasing, repeating or adding to what has been said

- Asking Open Questions can lead to interactive discussions. This requires some further research due to limited time to practise this in the club

- Discussing lectures and texts through practising AEL skills can help critical thinking. This means facilitating AEL can be a useful student-centred academic skill if used in conjunction with some academic skills advice
- Oral paraphrasing skills may appear to be helpful as a stepping stone to more accurate written paraphrasing. This is important in relation to academic misconduct in that developing these skills could help students who may find paraphrasing what they have read difficult
- Developing AEL skills is important in terms of the cognitive learning involved, as well as the social affective skills that students can gain, which can be practised both in online synchronous small group learning conversations and subsequently in professional practice.

Importantly, AEL is helpful to create good relationships, which can generally lead to a positive university experience that is likely to be enjoyable and engaging for students.

11.3. Limitations

This study is limited for several reasons.

First, the entire study is within a qualitative paradigm rendering it subjective by its nature. A research approach informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach was employed, which was complex in that participants' meaning was summarised and was based on the researcher making sense of the participants' meanings, which may have been misinterpreted at any point during the analysis process.

Second, there were only ten participants in the first part of the club and five in the second for the main study. Participants in the second part of the club had been in two separate groups in the first part. The SOW and all teaching materials were the same in both parts (apart from the addition of adding the Ethics note to the first slide for Group B only). However, there would have been differences in what was said in sessions in Group C and D meaning some difference in experience for these students, as well as the fact that they had not worked together across the two groups in the first part.

Furthermore, regarding the two groups, I have included tutor notes in my findings in which one set of notes, my teaching notes taken during and after sessions only applies to one of the two groups in the first part of the club in the main study. This means that these notes do not apply to the whole sample and only partially provide a trustworthy additional source or triangulation of methods.

Of note, and since I have also considered my pilot study in the previous year in several places in my dissertation in which there were only five student participants, these were very small samples meaning findings are not illustrative of university students in the UK at the time.

Third, I set up and facilitated the clubs and was the sole researcher, which implies it is biased. There is further unconscious bias in this research in that I am white British and European, whereas nine participants were Black African students and one was Black British. Importantly, all participants were previously educated in Nigeria or Ghana before starting their MSc Nursing degree in the UK. I would hope that I might be seen as an ally regarding my skin colour and background. Nevertheless, some unconscious bias is inevitable.

Fourth, for ethical reasons, I was not able to reveal some specific details participants revealed in the interviews and in my notes on the online synchronous learning sessions to avoid individuals being identified.

Fifth, AEL skills were not graded or assessed because the participants volunteered to attend the clubs in their free time, meaning attendance in the clubs can be seen as an additional or 'extra-curricular' activity that can contribute to student success and a positive university experience.

Sixth, it is important to emphasise that the MSc student participants in this study were training to become registered Mental Health nurses and were aware of the importance of good communication skills in their future profession of which they would have had bookish knowledge, as evidenced in my findings. Nevertheless, AEL skills were, as participating students and nursing lead tutors have informed me not practised in any learning sessions on the Programme, except in the club I facilitated for students who had volunteered to join in their free time. Participants

stressed the need to practise AEL in learning sessions much more, especially given that AEL skills take time and some patience to develop.

Finally, online synchronous learning in the club in the first part of my main study with both groups was limited to small numbers of three or four students communicating in the breakout rooms before returning to the main room on Zoom, in which there were usually only seven or eight students overall attending any club session. It is important for teaching in larger groups to consider its practicality. (In my pilot study, with the assistance of a learning technologist in an OSL session with a group on an MSc Management and International Business Programme in February 2021, I found that it was possible to create breakout rooms for a group of approximately 80 students divided into ten rooms.) It is not easy to manage conversations in large groups in online synchronous learning, where it is necessary to listen with attention to students, explain points (often based on slides), respond to what is in the chat and other functions, admit students who may have been knocked out due to connection issues, and pay attention to technical glitches.

11.4. Recommendations for HE practice

I suggest that AEL skills should be facilitated within learning programmes because it is likely that learning and practising these would benefit more students and not only those few students who volunteer to join an 'extra-curricular' academic conversation club. Furthermore, Pre-Registration Nursing students are required to work unpaid twelve and a half-hour shifts for several days a week in their practice placements. Participants in this study were in an intensive period in the second (final year) of their study and had considerable other important commitments on their time. If facilitating AEL skills could be integrated into learning programmes, as participants have mentioned, then it may be possible to glean more insight into the effectiveness of AEL skills in learning for a wider range of student participants.

My findings suggest that AEL skills should be facilitated in HE because importantly they encouraged good relationships between students in the clubs and positive learning experiences, which can result in successful student outcomes.

Furthermore, I suggest facilitating AEL in small tutorial groups (in groups of up to 20 students) would be most beneficial.

Other benefits to students arose from including Equality, Diversity and Inclusion conversations in the first online academic conversation club meeting in each club group, in which AEL skills were beginning to be presented, practised and discussed that could have had an impact on relationships between student participants in the club groups. Furthermore, AEL skills should be included in plans to reduce awarding gaps at strategic levels. Indeed, Compassionate-focused Pedagogy, I am pleased to see, is being integrated into curricula and plans at some UK universities to reduce awarding gaps. In the light of my discussion in this study, I suggest that consideration should be given to develop AEL skills in conjunction with compassionate skills. Developing compassionate skills may be a springboard to AEL skills or vice-versa. There is a possibility that AEL skills alongside compassionate skills may help reduce awarding gaps in HE.

AEL skills can help university students to understand others and develop good relationships between students of similar ethnicities, backgrounds and nationalities, as well as intercultural relationships too. This is important to me because, in my opinion, it is through intercultural conversations that we may understand and learn from each other. Rather than focusing on a 'deficit model' and blaming students when they do not appear to engage, which has been especially noticed and denounced in theses regarding Widening Participation HE students in the UK (Gilbert, 2015 and Farenga, 2019), tutors could facilitate development in AEL skills for student peers when learning in small group learning conversations.

AEL skills practised in online synchronous learning were beneficial to student participants in many ways. Participating students were able to use AEL skills in their nursing practice placements so it is likely that AEL skills would benefit in-person and blended learning environments as well. Furthermore, I suggest that AEL skills should be developed and embedded as part of subject teaching and academic skills curricula in future. Indeed, data suggest, AEL skills developed and practised in online synchronous learning were helpful for participants to explain complex terms and ideas, as well as providing a conversational stepping stone to

academic writing. Furthermore, facilitating AEL skills is recommended in HE because the ability to communicate well in teams, especially multi-ethnic teams and internationally, is considered a very important graduate attribute in terms of future employment.

AEL skills appear to be an important set of skills, especially for graduates in healthcare and other professions, such as Social Work, Business, Law, Education and Engineering where good communication is essential. Therefore, I recommend that AEL skills should be embedded into learning programmes in all fields of study. If opportunities to meet at set times are included in timetables, more students are likely to profit, especially considering the majority of university students who have very busy schedules and need to take up paid work alongside their studies, have caring commitments and who do not have time to attend an extra-curricular learning club.

Hence, I would recommend that AEL practice, similar to that in the clubs, is embedded into timetables and curricula.

11.5. Recommendations for IPA as a research approach in Education

An approach informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis appears to have been appropriate for this study and may provide an example of how other educational research studies may be conducted in future. IPA can reveal the lived experiences of participants' learning. I have found it a through approach regarding trustworthiness, transparency and rigour, in which I have considered double-hermeneutic meanings in participant data. Finally, working through the data arising from semi-structured interviews followed by an in depth and time-consuming step-by-step analytic process seemed to benefit my study.

11.6. Recommendations for further research in Education

It would be interesting to conduct research regarding AEL for postgraduate students studying in different fields in future, as well as for undergraduates. Furthermore, the study was conducted for a group of what appears to be highly motivated students who had volunteered to join the club at a time when they were incredibly busy with their studies (second semester of their final year). Therefore,

it would be helpful to conduct similar studies among students within programmes (rather that only volunteers in a club) and with larger numbers of student participants.

Some further research would be interesting related to elaboration in an academic conversation using oral paraphrasing and asking open questions. This is because of limited time to practise asking OQs in the clubs, not having recorded breakout room conversations and the point about elaboration only being tentatively suggested in my interview data.

It would be useful to explore AEL skills in a range of learning environments. In other words, online synchronous learning, in-person, blended (where part of the learning is online) and hybrid (online and in-person simultaneously). In addition, AEL skills between students and tutors could be explored. Several participants mentioned that the Zoom breakout rooms with a small number of students were helpful, so it would therefore be interesting to explore AEL skills for larger student groups in future.

Furthermore, it would also be important to consider widening participation students, such as neurodiverse students, students with disabilities or chronic illness, students experiencing physical or mental health issues, multi-ethnic groups and international students. It could be significant to facilitate AEL skills in future and research this for those students who do not appear to tutors to be engaging in learning.

More studies in comparing AEL with compassionate focussed pedagogy or combining these skills would also be helpful regarding reducing awarding gaps, student engagement and mattering. In addition, online synchronous learning that explores eye gaze and position of windows might reveal new insights in online learning. Further research to compare experiences of students in online synchronous learning regarding the cameras on or off activity similar to this study and exploration into combining such an activity with or without embedding AEL skills would be interesting.

Finally, research on embedding AEL skills in future learning programmes and curricula will hopefully benefit considerably more students, especially given that

this study is limited to very small groups of MSc Mental Health Nursing students in an 'extra-curricular' academic online learning club.

11.7. Conclusion

I am in awe of *all* the club members regarding what they achieved in the clubs, which was far beyond what I had expected, and especially given the time constraints on mature nursing students. Indeed, I had started with the aim to facilitate some practice in the development of AEL skills while discussing lectures and texts and to provide a time for students to meet, talk and make friends in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, when students had missed out on these opportunities and were unlikely to know each other. I had also not anticipated that students would meet outside club meetings to continue their small group online academic conversations and further practise the AEL skills they had developed in their placement practice.

Findings reveal that developing Active Empathic Listening in an online academic conversation club in the academic year 2021 - 2022 was beneficial to student nurses in this study as both academic and professional practice skills, which appear to be both cognitive and affective. AEL skills mattered to these student participants to create good relationships between members in the club in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns. Practising AEL skills in the clubs seems to have been valuable to the student experience for the student nurses in this study.

It is likely that developing AEL skills enhanced student engagement in academic online conversations when practised in small group breakout rooms, while boosting confidence in online synchronous learning and academic skills. The development of university students' AEL skills could be significant if facilitated and encouraged by tutors and programme directors in the future. Hence, it would be interesting to consider AEL skills as an HE pedagogy not only in nursing but in other fields of study too and at different levels.

An approach informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis revealed a rich account of the voices of a small group of Black African students who were studying at a university in England and had volunteered to join the club. It is important to note that an IPA approach falls within a subjective qualitative paradigm and that

this study was conducted and facilitated by the club tutor, who is white and a different ethnicity to the participants, therefore unconscious bias cannot be excluded.

Active Empathic Listening were beneficial skills for the university students in my study. Therefore, my study contributes to online synchronous learning practice in HE, which can be valuable to students' university experience when facilitated in small online synchronous academic conversation groups. Nevertheless, further research in AEL skills is necessary within different fields of study and in consideration of a range of student demographics in online, in-person and in blended learning environments.

Finally, findings from this study suggest that AEL skills practised in online synchronous academic conversation clubs were beneficial to student peer relationships and online engagement in the aftermath of Covid-19 Lockdowns and thus contributed to positive learning experiences at that time.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning	Page
AEL	Active Empathic Listening	5
AL	Active Listening	29
BERA	British Educational Research Authority	109
COI	Community of Inquiry	53
CfP	Compassionate-focused Pedagogy	230
DA	Data Analysis	117
EdD	Doctorate in Education	6
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI)	63
HE	Higher Educations	2
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis	16
JISC	Joint Information Systems Committee	218
LwA	Listening with Attention	48
MHN	Mental Health Nursing	18
NMC	Nursing and Midwifery Council	23
NVC	Non Verbal Communication	34
OP	Oral Paraphrasing	12
OQ(s)	Open Question(s)	38
OSL	Online synchronous learning	55
OT	Overarching Theme	126
PET	possible emerging theme	121
PETC	possible emerging theme cluster	121
PGR	Postgraduate Research	26
PSE	Pre Sessional English	11
RQ	Research Question	53
SGLC	Small Group Learning conversation	3
SoW	Scheme of Work	60
TA	Thematic Analysis	93
THE	Times Higher Education	43
UKRI	UK Research and Innovation	108
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development	39

Appendices

Appendix 1

Example participant profile and transcript for Participant C4

Summary from Participant Profile table (Chapter 6.7) for Participant C4

Participant	**C4** (pseudonym: Seye)
Age	42
Gender	Male
Nationality	Nigerian
Spoken lang. with family	English, Igbo, Pidgin
Best spoken lang.	English
Best written lang	English
Country of previous education	Nigeria
Arrival in UK	Many years ago

Notes from reflective journal about the interview for above participant

Short interview due to people entering room (in hospital office) so interview may have otherwise lasted a little longer

He spoke in a relaxed tone

Communicated points succinctly

Participant C4 Main part of interview (after personal information section)

S001 AF: So my overall Research Question, so what I'm looking at is, what have participating university students experiences have been like of attending online academic conversation clubs since starting their studies, during the Covid 19 pandemic - So these are related to online synchronous communication. Also, what you've learned in the club so there are some sub questions as well, so based on that I've got a list of some questions and thoughts for us to talk about.

> S002 C4: Okay.

S003 AF: Okay. So my first question is What has your experience of the online academic conversation clubs been like, so a wide open question, to start with.

> S004 C4: The experience has been good as I am able to relate more which by peers and I have learnt more as well about communication and how to respond yeah and how to how to make it […] better.

S005 AF: What was that word again sorry, how to make it …

> S006 C4: You know how to make communication therapeutic because with this mental health nursing any thoughts is based on communication it's with the patients is important that they also understand that you listen and that you are

able to paraphrase and give them feedback so it's been good and engaging with my peers as well and learning from each other.

S007 AF: learning from each other, lovely, yeah brilliant, brilliant so perhaps can you elaborate on that a bit more and You said it's been helpful to learn from each other and relate with your peers, which is lovely, and so what would you how would you describe your feelings towards the others in your group.

S008 C4: yeah well we'll learn from each other, so we have to take turns we have to paraphrase. It was it was nice to see that you know people paraphrase in different ways, whereas we've heard the same information, but then when we start to paraphrase we say the same thing, but basically in different ways. That is good to know that people who pick this up differently.

S009 AF: Ahh

S010 C4: It's nice to hear someone else's view.

S011 AF: Yeah great. So would you say they did it differently in so much as they had different viewpoints.

S012 C4: Yes, yes, while we heard the same thing they did it differently.

S013 AF: Mmm nice nice so um What would you say was perhaps easy or difficult in the club.

S014 C4: I wouldn't say anything was difficult. What I would say is that those that came into the club we're all committed to put in the extra time to learn I'm always up for every opportunity that comes my way.

S015 AF: Mmm

S016 C4: It was easy for you know it was easy to communicate amongst each other, and it was important to get the views and hear [them]. We're all laid back and relaxed as peers to freely freely communicate.

S017 AF: Okay, very nice very nice yeah so would you say you had a particular role in the club.

S018 C4: I participated yeah [pause].

S019 AF: Okay. How did you feel about your participation.

S020 C4: I felt it is good to participate, that you know I participated actively just like you know where we're having lectures and we putting our videos and stuff like this time around we got to put on our cameras, there was more active participation here.

S021 AF: Okay interesting Could you say something a bit about that because that's a very interesting aspect so it will be very interesting to see your views and know how it was for you.

S022 C4: yeah you know participating, you encouraged us to put our cameras, which is good because it it's you know it enables that active listening and it also gives the other person the confidence that you are present, that you are paying attention. So it was important to fully participate. Because most of our lectures are online. Yes, some of our lecturers have also complained that they do not see the cameras on. For someone like me that live far away from the campus. I did attend or by nature, despite the distance, however, when it's online is important that we put on our cameras so that the lecturer knows that we're all participating instead of saying oh you guys should come to the campus. So camera is on there is a chance that you pay more attention to what was going on as well.

S023 AF: yeah yeah exactly exactly good good.

S024 C4: Have I answered the question.

S025 AF: yeah lovely lovely so did having the cameras on change anything for you.

S026 C4: Yes, yeah it also makes me know that the other person is listening and is participating actively.

S027 AF: mm hmm good, good and could you say something, maybe about how you feel or your relationship to others may be regarding your personal background.

S028 C4: Regarding my personal background, I know that most of the participants are from the African background, however, if I was to participate to get involved with people from other ethnicities I wouldn't feel much different. I just have to communicate and make sure that if you listen to me, sometimes how I pronounce the words because it sounds like I always have blocked nose, however try to make myself audible.

S029 AF: Okay lovely Thank you. Good okay that's fine yeah yeah okay so what's about this is my sort of second Question really um what has learning in online so in online synchronous communication being like for you since you started your course last year and during the Covid 19 pandemic, what has what has that been like for you.

S030 C4: Learning online, it has its advantages. It would have been nice if we did your course earlier. When we were about to study it would have kept us better prepared. However learning online has been interesting to see how different lecturers moderate when you have large number of students, sometimes moderating them can be a bit tricky. Especially when the students have the when they have the authority to unmute anytime as well. You will find that some people are either not raising their hands to speak or they're doing other things at the background, you see that some people are not participating. They either forget their mic or they are [unclear] so yeah but online, personally, I tried to make sure that I get myself prepared and I engage with the lecture.

S031 AF: mm hmm so in the club, was it different from other lectures.

S032 C4: In the club it was quite different yes in the club was different because the population was much smaller. And you know is freer [unclear] the club was different it was good, we were able to interact more freely.

S033 AF: mmm hmm interesting and if you I know you haven't had many sessions, since we've had the club. But I wonder whether the club sessions made a difference.

S034 C4: Yes, that made a lot of difference because when I start a lecture I normally put my camera on, and then I see a lot of students not putting their cameras on then I turn mine off. But you know, having attended your classes your sessions is important to leave your camera on and I'm sure that you're engaging because the lecturers always put their camera on and they want to see that we're also engaged and participating.

S035 AF: hmm um any other ways, in addition to the cameras.

S036 C4: Yes, of course obviously we use things like when using the raising your hands when you want to ask a question. When you have the opportunity to speak is important to make sure that you are understood like using phrases you have given us like paraphrasing. One of the students that are on my colleagues who participated [in the club] I noticed, he began to use that the questions we learned in the club like, do you mean this. So that was really when we attended our lead our quarter lectures. You say is this what you mean So yes, I could use those phrases when I had the opportunity to speak.

S037 AF: Mmm. So that student was someone from the club as well.

S038 C4: yes. yes.

S039 AF: Yes, Great that's really interesting good.

C4: Yes, and we will add responses like yes, that is exactly what I mean.

S040 AF: Oh good oh good and how do you feel about that then.

S041 C4: yeah you know, I feel that that's that's good is good to you know employ what we've learned.

S042 AF: yeah. I'm just scribbling down a few bits and pieces, just in case there's a problem with the recording. I am petrified of that. yeah yeah yeah I mean we got thrown into we got thrown into this hold online business, so do you do you prefer online or have you just got used to it, or you obviously you see the advantages, because of traveling.

S043 C4: yeah I can hear you though.

S044 AF: Yeah obviously you see the advantages and disadvantages, because it's nearer and easier in so far as you don't have to travel, but any anything else you felt, you know when you first started with the whole online business what was it like for you.

S045 C4: It was a bit, it was a bit chaotic when I first started. Online obviously we're all new students were different coming in. yeah it was a bit chaotic the lecturer had to always remind people our colleagues on the ground rules. Most of the time so yeah. It was, but what one thing, the one thing I've learned is it's good to get yourself prepared tried to login early if you can because when you begin to have this technical issues you may see that it may last 10 to 15 minutes into the time of the lecture so it's good to get prepared and login early.

S046 AF: Good good and what about you came you came here from Nigeria. Did you come directly here yeah so use your first. So what was that, like arriving in the middle of lockdown and not being able to see I'm on meet personally other students.

S047 C4: Well I've been here for about 16 years.

S048 AF: Oh, I see okay okay fair enough, so you do have other contacts here. I think it might have been quite difficult for those students who arrived here um who arrived here from other countries and were new in the country as well.

S049 C4: I know it must have been difficult for them considering the Pandemic.

S050 AF: yeah exactly exactly and what was it like for you, I mean it was difficult for everybody, but what was it like for you.

S051 C4: It was difficult as well. It was difficult and with the school having a lot of logistical issues. So getting us ready for lectures and people missing their timetables people not registering properly. It was a difficult experience, but we have some lectures also supported us and they said it was new for them as well, because they also go into the same the same problem, and you know they had to guide us through gradually. Obviously, that's enhanced our resilience.

S055 AF: Interesting point. What about you're learning you're learning outcomes and what you learn from the club. What would you say you've really learned. If anything.

S056 C4: Well yeah I'll just I'll take from the club is you know with online lectures being the order of the day now is to to get to get fully involved, let the other person know that you are involved because the other person is far away. And with the patients as well it's important for them to understand that you're communicating properly so using the paraphrasing is also good so that they know you understand.

S057 AF: yeah they know you understand that. yeah good. Okay What was it like can you say a bit more maybe about the quite a few breakout room we had and then again we were chatting in the main room and sometimes I asked you to put some things in the chat what was that like.

> S058 C4: The breakout rooms, where we used them properly, we using effectively communicating with those in the room on the topic which were given. So it was it was useful having the breakout room.

S059 AF: Great great now yeah and different from in your other session so I can only guess what other sessions that like.

> S060 C4: It depends on the on the number of the number of people in the breakout rooms.

S061 AF: Okay yeah. Good interesting, yeah and So anything else you'd like to say about how you communicate or communication online, I mean you've said quite a bit something about the teaching you've been very kind. Should I say so, so please don't just ask and answer to please me okay so Is there something perhaps that that you didn't like so much or that was difficult or challenging or maybe could be done differently.

> S062 C4: um you know some of the things you said where new so it was good, it was a good learning opportunity.

S063 AF: Ah what was new.

> C4: I'm trying to I'm trying to remember. yeah. I know what to say umm.

S064 AF: Ah.

> S065 C4: There's a word. Empathic listening. That's it.

> S066 C4: You gave us some tools that was new to me.

S067 AF: Some tools.

> S068 C4: Empathic Listening skills. It was useful with patients and to show empathy and it improves communication.

Noise in room so we decided to end the interview.

Appendix 2

Section of Excel sheet for Interview 1

Fig. A-01 Excel sheet for interview 1

This figure summarises the data analysis for each participant in Group C. The segments of the transcript are assigned to possible emerging themes clusters (PECTs, see column 1). The coded segment-keys refer to the interview number, group, participant number and segments in the transcripts.

Assignment of segments of participant C4, see Appendix 1, can be seen in the last column in this screenshot. The same colours on the sheet are also represented in the bar charts in my findings, Chapter 8.

Appendix 3

Data analysis sheet for Interview 1 Participant C4

Summary of Participant's Possible Meaning	Noting	PECT	Seg No
Good exp. in club and relationships with peers. Has learned more about communication.	+ve exp. & learning	2	1-C4-004
Has learnt how to make comm. 'therapeutic' for mental health nursing – patients know he listens and can paraphrase and practice feedback. It also is good for engaging and learning from each other.	Comm. in Nursing practice & engagement in learning. (Check what 'paraphrasing' and 'feedback' mean in Nursing/MH Nursing for discussion)	11	1-C4-006
Learnt from each other's viewpoints through OP – even when they had been presented with the same info (in learning sessions).	critical friends	5	1-C4-008
Nice to hear other views.	Critical thinking	23	1-C4-010
Nothing difficult in club – all members were committed to learn.	Learning in club easy Notices own & other members motivation	26	1-C4-014
Easy to communicate as good relations in club – all laid back and relaxed.	Importance of good relations in learning environments	3	1-C4-016
Participated in club – more actively due to cameras on.	Adv. of cameras on	14	1-C4-022
You can see if other person is listening and participating if cameras are on.	Adv. of cameras on	14	1-C4-026
Not much difference if others in group are not from African backgrounds, except perhaps different pronunciations.	Pronunciation across varieties of languages	19	1-C4-028

SPPM	Noting	PECT	Seg No.
Online learning has advantages. Club should have been held earlier to help members prepare better. Some students are not engaged in other online sessions - but he is.	Preparation for sessions or assessments?	17	1-C4-030
Small group size helped interact more freely.	What would the club have been like in a larger group?	2	1-C4-032
Having his camera on helped him engage as he learnt in the club.	Cameras on & engagement	14	1-C4-034
Noticed another club member used the OP phrases leant in club in other sessions and he did this too.	OP phrases appear to have been beneficial for Asking questions and engaging in online learning sessions	5	1-C4-036
Examples of OP phrases provided.		4	1-C4-039
Important to be prepared for online sessions and login early.	Motivation?	26	1-C4-045
OP helps to get fully involved in lectures and for communication with patients. It helps that they know you understand.	Benefits of OP	5	1-C4-056
Proper use of breakout room in club helped communication. But depends on number of people in the breakout rooms. Good learning opportunity.	Breakout rooms and Communication	15	1-C4-058 1-C4-064
Some aspects of teaching where new in club. Especially empathic listening skills, which were useful with patients for communication.	Interesting that it was new to this student who should be aware of these skills	8	1-C4-064 1-C4-068

Podcast Transcript

Extract from Podcast 25 in School of Health & Social Work Series

(Pseudonyms used)

D3: Hello, the online academic conversation club, welcome to the HSK Podcast today.

D4: Thank you, Adaora, we are looking forward to the HSK key student Podcast.

D3: Now let's introduce Anita, who has been the tutor for the online academic conversation club and I understand from the other Members that she has done a wonderful job I would therefore ask her to give you a very brief introduction of the club.

Tutor Researcher: Thank you, Adaora, for your invitation to the HSK student pod my name is Anita and I'm one of the tutors on the student success and academic skills or SASS team, for the past couple of years I've been involved in various projects in HSK.

One of them is the online academic conversation club that I have been facilitating in MSc mental health nursing.

The conversation club members have been attending the club voluntarily in their free time.

D3: Tutor Researcher: Thank you, Anita. I would now like to call Yasmine to introduce herself.

D2: Hi tutors and student for listeners, my name is Yasmine, and I am mental health nurse I've been a member of the online academic conversation club for two years and it's been an amazing journey.

D3: Wow! Thank you so much for that one that's it all over to you Diamond:

D2: Hi, my name is Diamond and also a mental health nursing student and I am happy to be a member of the club with my friends.

D3: Lovely and over to you Isaac.

D4: Hi guys, my name is Isaac, I've been a member of the club for under one semester, but this a remarkable learning experience from being a member of this amazing club.

D3: Thank you so much, and lastly, Emeke.

C1: Hi listeners, my name is Emeke and the people I love to call friends, is a pleasure to be here on this podcast as a club Member, stay tuned, Thank you.

D3: Thank you, Emeke.

D3: My name is Adaora and I've been a member of the club, since my first year, it has been a wonderful experience for me, and now I'm going to ask the other Members here today, some questions.

D3: Yasmine, can you please tell us why students should join the online academic conversation club.

D2: Thank you, Adaora, for any students who would like to develop your communication skills and would like to socialize with others, I think the online academic conversation club, is a good place to be.

D3: Indeed, it's a good place to be, and Diamond.

D2: Thank you, Adaora, I would like to say that the club is helpful for everyone in HSK, who would like to develop their communication skills, especially in the area of empathetic listening the club has personally helped me to develop my skills in this area, thank you.

D3: That's really good to know, and Isaac.

D4: Adaora my training as a mental health nurse, you know is essentially to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitude to become an NMC registrant.

D4: This Club it has breakout groups and practice sessions and has afforded me the opportunity to practice the desired skills and to get big, good feedback from my Members, I found this invaluable.

D3: Invaluable indeed, so Emeke let's hear from you.

C1: Thank you, Adaora yeah membership of the club [laughs] provides us, members, with the opportunity to develop the relevant skills which will build their confidence and the daily communication and interactions in academic writing and relationship development, thank you for this.

D3: Joining the club we help students build long lasting friendships and connections, you can meet students from different backgrounds and gain transferable skills such as communication skills, now over to the next question but that's the next question, can you tell us about the skills you've developed from being part of this club and how it has helped you?

D2: Thank you again Adaora as a mental health nurse developing therapeutic relationships with service users is of utmost importance to me, active empathic listening is a skill relevant to this relationship development, and I have developed this overtime from the club, thank you.

D3: Thank you, Yasmine and Diamond.

D2: Thanks again Adaora as I've said earlier, the club has helped me gain skills, one of them is the skill of cooperation which has helped me improve on my [unclear] communication and relationship with service users and my friends in general or how to paraphrase and has helped me to avoid making mistakes by ensuring that I get the appropriate information that is being communicated Thank you.

D3: Very, very important communication is very important and Isaac can we hear from you, please.

D4: Thank you Adaora, the club has complimented my theoretical learning on communication, I am now able to communicate more effectively with my service users to develop the trust and engage them for appropriate nursing interventions, thank you to the club.

D3: Thank you to Isaac and Emeke.

C1: Yeah membership of the club has helped me to develop solid academic writing skills, especially in the areas of analysing and synthesizing information from theorists journal

articles first improving my scores and subsequent assignments, that is, after the club, thank you.

D3: It can't be said any better that from active listening skills to Oral Paraphrasing to academic writing skills, the academic club helps educate students indeed. Lastly, I would like to ask what did you enjoy most about being in this club in one final word?

D3: Well, after two.

D2: Okay, I think I enjoy meeting people outside of classroom engagement, so it, this has helped me to socialize exceedingly well, thank you.

D3: Thank you, Yasmine.

D4: I have thoroughly enjoyed the structured and methodical composition of the sessions by the leader and these has actually made it more interesting and more interesting.

D3: Thank you, of course, interesting and umm Diamond can we hear from you, please, one final word.

Diamond: One final word I have, umm, well, building my confidence and communicating with service users has been you know, one of the you know best values of you know, what I gained from joining the academic club, thank you.

D3: Thank you so much Diamond and then please, Emeke.

C1: Thank you yeah, the opportunity to practice and get immediate feedback and then the way I needed to handle these sessions is one of the factors that I enjoyed most about the club and, of course everyone, I encourage everyone to join as soon as they see the next invitation for the academic club, thank you.

D3: Thank you so much, it has been incredibly fun meeting people from different backgrounds, do join the online conversation club, because this would count towards your goal, as a word, may I now invite Anita to give the final message to the HSK then.

Tutor Researcher: Thank you so much Adaora, and all of you, so thank you to the Members that are here today, we have several members in the online academic conversation clubs, so thank you Yasmine, Diamond, Isaac and Emeke and Adaora. Thank you all it's great that you have benefited so much and made friends. The online academic conversation club is also the focus of my research for my doctorate in education, so thank you, you have been amazing and you have contributed to not only to my research, but now to the HSK student Pod, so thanks everyone.

Appendix 5

Ideographic Summary Participant C4 and Group C Summary

The club was a good experience for C4 because it helped build relationships with other members and to learn more about communication. He found learning Oral Paraphrasing skills particularly helpful in terms of engagement. OP was a new skill for him, and he provided examples in the interview of some OP phrases learned in the club that he and another member used in other sessions. He also said that OP and empathic listening were important with patients.

He was motivated to learn and thinks online challenges helped him be resilient. He found communicating in breakout rooms and having cameras on helpful and mentioned that the small number of club members made communicating easier.

The interview was interrupted (after a considerable period) and had to end due to people entering the participant's room.

Group C Summary Interview 1

Data of all four participants revealed that attending the club was a positive social and learning experience for them. It helped them build good relationships and interact well with the other club members. They stressed the importance of learning about communication skills, especially Oral Paraphrasing and active listening. Active listening was also expressed as empathic listening. All participants employed these skills with service users in their professional practice and in online learning conversation meetings in the club, as was in other learning sessions. These skills appear to help engagement in online learning sessions, yet all were highly motivated learners.

There was a difference of opinion regarding online learning in that two mentioned it had been challenging, one preferred it to in person teaching and another enjoyed overcoming some of the challenges. Three participants mentioned that having cameras on was beneficial to learning conversations and that it was useful to have been made aware of this.

The small size of the group and breakout rooms was an advantage. Three participants mentioned that the club would have been even more beneficial if it had been held earlier in their MSc programme.

The two female students felt they could identify more easily with other people since attending the club. They both emphasised that their listening skills had improved and that they now interrupt less in learning, professional and social conversations.

Appendix 6

Ethics Notification

University of Hertfordshire UH

SOCIAL SCIENCES, ARTS AND HUMANITIES ECDA

ETHICS APPROVAL NOTIFICATION

TO   **Anita Fromm**

CC   **Prof Joy Jarvis**

FROM   **Dr Ian Willcock, Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities ECDA Chairman**

DATE   **03/11/20**

Protocol number: **cEDU/PGR/UH/04811**

Title of study: An exploration of students' experiences of oral paraphrasing in online seminar conversations at a UK university

Your application for ethics approval has been accepted and approved with the following conditions by the ECDA for your School and includes work undertaken for this study by the named additional workers below:

no additional workers named

Conditions of approval specific to your study:

Ethics approval has been granted subject to the following conditions:

The supervisor must ensure all the following points are addressed before activity starts:

•   Personal data may be being collected which is not required for the study – making this optional is not acceptable – you must only collect data that is absolutely necessary. The EC1 is very confused on this (Q15.1).
•   All data and recordings must be stored on the student's UH-supplied One Drive account. No data should be stored on personal laptops.
•   The supervisor needs to have sight of written permission to approach students before any recruitment of subjects takes place.

General conditions of approval:

Ethics approval has been granted subject to the standard conditions below:

Permissions: Any necessary permissions for the use of premises/location and accessing participants for your study must be obtained in writing prior to any data collection commencing. Failure to obtain adequate permissions may be considered a breach of this protocol.

External communications: Ensure you quote the UH protocol number and the name of the approving Committee on all paperwork, including recruitment advertisements/online requests, for this study.

Invasive procedures: If your research involves invasive procedures you are required to complete and submit an EC7 Protocol Monitoring Form, and copies of your completed consent paperwork to this ECDA once your study is complete.

Submission: Students must include this Approval Notification with their submission.

Validity:

This approval is valid:

From: 03/11/2020

To: 20/12/2022

Appendix 7

Ethics Notification Amendment 1

University of Hertfordshire **UH**

SOCIAL SCIENCES, ARTS AND HUMANITIES ECDA

ETHICS APPROVAL NOTIFICATION

TO   Anita Fromm

CC   Prof Joy Jarvis

FROM   Dr Ian Willcock, Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities ECDA Chair

DATE   12/05/2021

Protocol number: **acEDU/PGR/UH/04811(1)**

Title of study: First and second year university students' experiences of online synchronous communication while learning in groups since starting to study during the COVID-19 pandemic at a university in Britain

Your application to modify and extend the existing protocol as detailed below has been accepted and approved by the ECDA for your School and includes work undertaken for this study by the named additional workers below:

no additional workers named

Modification: Detailed in EC2

Original protocol: Any conditions relating to the original protocol approval remain and must be complied with.

Permissions: Any necessary permissions for the use of premises/location and accessing participants for your study must be obtained in writing prior to any data collection commencing. Failure to obtain adequate permissions may be considered a breach of this protocol.

External communications: Ensure you quote the UH protocol number and the name of the approving Committee on all paperwork, including recruitment advertisements/online requests, for this study.

Invasive procedures: If your research involves invasive procedures you are required to complete and submit an EC7 Protocol Monitoring Form, and copies of your completed consent paperwork to this ECDA once your study is complete.

Submission: Students must include this Approval Notification with their submission.

Validity:

This approval is valid:

From: 12/05/2021

To: 20/12/2022

Appendix 8

Ethics Notification Amendment 2

University of Hertfordshire **UH**

SOCIAL SCIENCES, ARTS AND HUMANITIES ECDA

ETHICS APPROVAL NOTIFICATION

TO	**Anita Fromm**
CC	**Professor Joy Jarvis**
FROM	**Dr Brendan Larvor, Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities ECDA Vice Chairman**
DATE	**18/02/2022**

Protocol number: acEDU/PGR/UH/04811(2)

Title of study: An exploration of students' experiences of oral paraphrasing in online seminar conversations at a UK university

Your application to modify and extend the existing protocol as detailed below has been accepted and approved by the ECDA for your School and includes work undertaken for this study by the named additional workers below:

No additional workers named

Modification:

All modifications as detailed in the "Other" section of the EC2

Original protocol: Any conditions relating to the original protocol approval remain and must be complied with.

Permissions: Any necessary permissions for the use of premises/location and accessing participants for your study must be obtained in writing prior to any data collection commencing. Failure to obtain adequate permissions may be considered a breach of this protocol.

External communications: Ensure you quote the UH protocol number and the name of the approving Committee on all paperwork, including recruitment advertisements/online requests, for this study.

Invasive procedures: If your research involves invasive procedures you are required to complete and submit an EC7 Protocol Monitoring Form, and copies of your completed consent paperwork to this ECDA once your study is complete.

Submission: Students must include this Approval Notification with their submission.

Validity:

This approval is valid:

From: 18/02/2022

To: 20/12/2022

All documents regards ethics approval also contain the following section:

Please note:

Failure to comply with the conditions of approval will be considered a breach of protocol and may result in disciplinary action which could include academic penalties.
Additional documentation requested as a condition of this approval protocol may be submitted via your supervisor to the Ethics Clerks as it becomes available. All documentation relating to this study, including the information/documents noted in the conditions above, must be available for your supervisor at the time of submitting your work so that they are able to confirm that you have complied with this protocol.

Should you amend any aspect of your research or wish to apply for an extension to your study you will need your supervisor's approval (if you are a student) and must complete and submit a further EC2 request.
Approval applies specifically to the research study/methodology and timings as detailed in your Form EC1A or as detailed in the EC2 request. In cases where the amendments to the original study are deemed to be substantial, a new Form EC1A may need to be completed prior to the study being undertaken.

Failure to report adverse circumstance/s may be considered misconduct.
Should adverse circumstances arise during this study such as physical reaction/harm, mental/emotional harm, intrusion of privacy or breach of confidentiality this must be reported to the approving Committee immediately.

Appendix 9

Ethics Permission Email from Department Head

Re: voluntary teaching and Ethics permission for my EdD research

Philomena Shaughnessy
To ● Anita Fromm
Cc ● Joy Jarvis; ○ Gwyneth James
ⓘ You replied to this message on 04/01/2021 09:56.

Sun 03/01/2021 17:50

Dear Anita

Sincere apologies for the delay in responding.

I have read the attachments and am happy for you to continue with your research based on the email trail below and the confirmation that the conditions on the EC1A form Q15.1 are fulfilled.

Please let me know if you have any issues regarding the HSK students that you are interviewing.

Very best

Phil

Philomena Shaughnessy
Interim Head of Department Nursing Health and Wellbeing
School of Health and Social Work
Wright Building
College Lane Campus
01707 285991

From: Anita Fromm <a.fromm@herts.ac.uk>
Sent: 03 January 2021 16:37
To: Philomena Shaughnessy <p.a.shaughnessy@herts.ac.uk>
Cc: Joy Jarvis <j.jarvis@herts.ac.uk>; Gwyneth James <g.m.james@herts.ac.uk>
Subject: RE: voluntary teaching and Ethics permission for my EdD research
Dear Philomena,

End of document