

Educators as Connectors: Bridging the Equivalence Gap Between Online and Face-To-Face Learning in Tertiary Education

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Abstract

The rapid growth in online education has amplified significant challenges in providing equivalent peer connection experiences across study modes. This article examines which educator practices, as identified by students, support equivalent peer connections in online and face-to-face study modes. Using constructivist grounded theory methodology, we conducted in-depth interviews with 15 undergraduate students at an Australian university who had experienced both delivery modes. Our analysis establishes four essential areas for enabling equivalent peer connection experiences: informal conversations, initial connection opportunities, peer visibility, and educator presence. From these findings, we developed a framework of equivalent educator practices that bridge the modal equivalence gap. This student-informed framework provides practical guidance for educators, ensuring all students have access to the academic and social benefits peer connection provides.

Keywords: Peer connection; online learning; higher education; equivalence.

Introduction

The pursuit of educational equivalence across different study modes has become a regulatory imperative in Australian higher education. What constitutes genuine equivalence from the student perspective remains poorly understood, particularly in relation to peer connections, which research consistently identifies as crucial to student success. In Australia, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), through the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021, requires that higher education providers provide students with “equivalent opportunities for successful transition into and progression through their course of study, irrespective of their education background, entry pathway, mode or place of study” (TEQSA, 2021). This regulatory emphasis on equivalence has become increasingly significant as more students choose to study online, a shift accelerated by learning adjustments through the COVID-19 pandemic. However, what constitutes equivalence in practice remains notably vague, particularly regarding peer connections for students in multi-modal learning environments. This article addresses this critical gap by examining student perspectives on educator practices that support equivalent peer connection experiences across face-to-face and online study modes. Drawing on interviews with 15 undergraduate students who experienced both delivery modes, we present a framework of educator practices that facilitate equitable opportunities for meaningful peer connections regardless of study mode.



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Impacts of Peer Connections on Student Success

The role of peer connections has become increasingly critical as online study modes increase in popularity. In Australia alone, students choosing to study online increased by 45% between 2011 and 2016 (McNeill, 2018) with student preferences for online or blended learning persisting post-pandemic (Mehta et al., 2024).

Student success in higher education is reliant on a range of factors, including student retention, engagement and employability (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Research has established clear links between academic success and a student's sense of belonging, of which peer connections form a fundamental component (Goguen et al., 2010; Kuh et al., 2006). The positive aspects of peer connections extend beyond academic performance to include enhanced wellbeing, increased motivation and development of critical professional skills (Mayhew et al., 2016; van der Meer et al., 2022).

Approaches for establishing and maintaining a sense of belonging via peer connection have long been a focus of academic scholarship (Berthelon et al., 2019; Brouwer et al., 2022; Menzies & Nelson, 2012). While some research suggests peer connections can be similarly effective for enhancing student outcomes (Collier, 2022; Drysdale et al., 2022; Razak & See, 2010) they also highlight the complexity of establishing these connections. A systematic review by Tibingana-Ahimbisibwe et al., (2022) points to an over-reliance on synchronous online methods that merely replicate face-to-face interactions, reinforcing Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) insights that fostering a sense of belonging online is more complex than simply connecting students with each other. It requires educators to employ specific practices that create equivalent opportunities for connection regardless of their study mode.

Educators play a crucial role in facilitating meaningful peer connections across all learning modes. Mahoney et al. (2022) posit that deliberate educator practices foster not only immediate synchronous connections but can also support the development of sustainable peer networks that extend beyond formal learning environments. The educator's approach to creating welcoming environments and facilitating discourse significantly impacts students' ability to form peer connections across study modes, however, research on equivalent experiences across modes remains limited, with studies typically focusing on specific factors, such as academic results, engagement levels, or attrition (Means et al., 2010) rather than seeking to establish genuinely equivalent peer connection experiences.

Despite the growing body of research examining peer connection in separate modes, there remains a gap in understanding which specific educator practices support equivalent peer connection experiences across face-to-face and online learning modes.

Educational Equivalence in Higher Education

To meaningfully address the question of equivalent peer connection experiences, we must first examine the concept of equivalence itself within higher education contexts. The term *equivalence* appears repeatedly in the educational research literature of the past 20 years, but it is rarely explicitly defined (Clarke et al., 2016; Platt et al., 2014; Richardson & Coates, 2014; Stevens et al., 2021). Englund (2005) provides one of the few definitions of equivalence in an educational context. He suggests that equivalence is not about providing a uniform learning experience for all students through identical teaching methods. Rather, it is about creating learning experiences that employ alternative methods of achieving common educational goals. Providing an equivalent education for different students may involve distinctly different learning experiences.

Online and face-to-face courses are frequently compared on the basis of institutional measures of equivalence such as academic achievement levels and student retention rates (Bettinger et al., 2017; Glazier et al., 2021; Richardson & Coates, 2014; Stevens et al., 2021; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). However, educational equivalence can also be defined in other non-institutional terms. Specifically, student perceptions of the equivalence of different study modes can affect their learning experiences, pedagogical outcomes and acceptance of delivery methods. Platt et al. (2014), for example, state that students perceive variations in the equivalence of online and face-to-face classes in areas such as flexibility and convenience, interaction with instructors and classmates, and knowledge gained.

A significant amount of research on educational equivalence has focused on institutional measures, with little attention paid to the student perspective (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Glazier et al., 2021; Means et al., 2010; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). This study attempts to address that imbalance by prioritising the student voice and examining equivalent experiences through the lens of their lived experience across different study modes. By centring student perspectives on peer connections—an aspect previously established as critical to student success and sense of belonging—this research offers insights into the practical educator practices which facilitate equivalent experiences regardless of delivery mode.

Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) to investigate educational equivalence through student perspectives. Specifically, we sought to answer the question: *From student perspectives, which educator practices support equivalent peer connection experiences in face-to-face and online study modes?*

Fifteen undergraduate students at an Australian university were interviewed about their experiences studying in different modes and their perceptions of educational equivalence. The students ranged in age from 22- 57, lived in seven different geographical regions, and included five males, eight females, and two non-binary individuals. All participants were enrolled in an undergraduate digital media course and had experienced both face-to-face and online study modes, partly due to COVID-19 restrictions. Recruitment involved a broad invitation to eligible students, with initial selection aiming for diversity across age, gender, location, and study mode experience. Theoretical sampling was then used to select participants who could provide insights into emerging themes (Charmaz, 2014).

Semi-structured interviews focused on students' experiences and perceptions of equivalence in online and face-to-face learning. Participants were asked open-ended questions about each study mode, their preferences, challenges, and experiences. This approach allowed students to define equivalence in their own terms. Interviews were conducted either on campus or via Zoom, and all sessions were recorded for analysis. The transcripts were analysed in accordance with Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory approach (2014, pp. 111-113), involving three stages of analysis: initial, focused and theoretical coding. This research was conducted with approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of CQUniversity (Approval Number: 0000022846).

Results

Analysis of semi-structured interviews with students revealed distinct differences in how peer-to-peer relationships develop in online versus on-campus environments. While on campus, students find it easier to form connections with their peers through natural interactions before, during, and after class; online students face significant barriers to establishing these connections. This disparity can create a notable modal equivalence gap that limits online students' access to academic and social-emotional benefits of peer connection.

However, our analysis identified that strong peer connections can be formed online when intentionally facilitated by the educator. Four key themes are established as essential areas for enabling equivalent peer connection experiences across study modes: informal conversations, initial connection opportunities, peer visibility, and educator presence. While the way in which students build connections online differs significantly from those in traditional face-to-face classrooms, our findings suggest that deliberate educator practices can bridge this equivalence gap.

The framework presented in Table 1 summarises these findings, contrasting the inherent advantages of physical proximity in on-campus settings with equivalent educator practices that can be implemented online. Each practice area is explored in detail below, illustrated with student perspectives that informed our analysis.

Table 1*Framework of Educator Practices Supporting Peer Connection Equivalence*

What works (as identified by students)	Equivalent educator practices	
	On-campus	Online
Informal or natural conversations with peers	Inherent: Physical proximity enables casual student interaction before, during and after class Educator practices: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create dedicated class time for informal peer discussions 	Educator practices: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide unrecorded discussion time before or after a synchronous online class - Create dedicated class time that allows for informal peer discussions - Offer optional informal drop-in sessions
Initial peer connection opportunities	Inherent: Physical proximity creates natural opportunities to meet and interact with peers Educator practices: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Facilitate formal introductions and icebreaker activities - Design group work requiring collaboration 	Educator practices: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design structured opportunities where students are required to interact, engage and collaborate, including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Facilitate formal introductions and icebreaker activities o Require participation in peer feedback opportunities o Implement regular breakout room activities
Peer visibility	Inherent: Students can see each other's work through physical proximity Educator practices: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organise in-class sharing of work - Facilitate group discussions about progress 	Educator practices: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Design opportunities for students to share and discuss their work and progress <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Create structured opportunities for sharing work o Facilitate regular progress check-in discussions
Educator presence	Inherent: Physical presence conveys approachability through body language, tone of voice and informal interactions Educator practices: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Foster and guide conversations between students - Create a supportive classroom environment 	Educator practices: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Demonstrate approachability through communication style - Actively facilitate and participate in online discussions - Create a responsive, supportive online environment

Informal or Natural Conversations with Peers

Informal conversations with peers are crucial for building connections. While these opportunities arise naturally in face-to-face classes due to students' physical proximity, educators must intentionally create equivalent opportunities in an online environment. Jessica¹ highlighted how natural these conversations are on campus, stating, "Face to face, you know, someone's sitting next to you, and it's a lot more natural to be like, 'Ha ha, that was odd,' or something like that."

Students highlighted several effective educator practices for fostering these connections in online settings: providing unrecorded discussion time before or after classes, creating dedicated time for informal discussions, and offering optional drop-in sessions.

When students are on campus, they naturally congregate and have a chance to chat with their peers before and after class. In an online setting, educators need to make a more deliberate effort to open the session prior to the start of class to allow students to talk informally if they want to connect with peers. Jordan highlighted the value of this peer connection, noting, "I'd say probably the chats after class that weren't recorded. It was just a way to see where everyone was going, how they were doing."

¹ All participants were assigned pseudonyms, and identifying information has been removed to maintain confidentiality.

In a face-to-face class on campus, students can chat with one another during class time. This is considerably more challenging in an online setting. Utilising break-out rooms within a synchronous online class allows students to meet and talk in a more informal setting and encourages stronger peer connection. Students acknowledged the importance of these chances to engage with their peers. Alex explained how these breakout rooms foster more natural discussions among students:

Zoom breakout rooms are a pretty good idea. When you put us into breakout rooms ... if it's just maybe four or five of us, we can just chat and still do the work and have a bit of fun. And then we leave the breakout room back to the Zoom call. And that's back to normal.

Online students face barriers to “hanging out” with their peers—something that happens more naturally for on campus students. Educators can bridge this equivalence gap by offering optional drop-in sessions outside scheduled class times. These informal sessions can create spaces where students can interact with each other without the pressure of formal learning objectives. Morgan, an on-campus student forced online during COVID lockdowns, highlighted how these sessions fostered connection despite physical separation:

[Being] flexible as well to have those little extra sessions ... sometimes they just feel fun ... It's relaxed ... Sometimes the conversation drifts a bit, but that's normal, and it feels human and nice ... You're just enjoying being together, especially because you don't get that campus time, but you just get to hang out.

These examples demonstrate how deliberate educator practices can create opportunities for informal peer connection that online students would otherwise miss. By establishing these intentional spaces for informal conversations, educators enable online students to develop valuable peer connections that enhance their learning experience.

Initial Peer Connection Opportunities

This study revealed that opportunities for developing peer connections contributed to an equivalence gap between study modes, with on-campus environments facilitating these initial connections through the physical proximity of students, enabling them to engage with one another simply by attending class. Rebecca explained how these initial peer connections develop on campus:

In a face-to-face thing ... when you group together with people, you're kind of forced to become friends with them ... if it's the first or second class and you don't know anybody ... and you're all forced to talk to each other. You sort of get that connection of awkwardness, and so they become ... the people that you gravitate towards in your future classes.

In contrast, online students often hesitate to contact their peers and lack clear protocols for initiating these connections. Without educator practices aimed at facilitating student interaction, engagement, and collaboration in the online environment, students risk missing the opportunity to develop essential connections that foster ongoing peer relationships.

To bridge this gap, educators must deliberately create structured opportunities for students to interact, engage and collaborate with each. These structured interactions create pathways for online students to establish meaningful connections, transforming isolated online learning into a connected experience. Morgan highlighted how deliberate educator practices directly influenced whether online students form peer connections, citing issues when trying to contact peers:

You don't get that same connection without having to message them individually ... And I think the group sense can be lacking in certain classes ... It does also depend on the lecturer or how they handle it 'cause some lecturers have enforced that a bit better and given space for that to happen, whereas others don't.

Effective approaches to implementing this practice, as highlighted by students, include formal introductions, engagement in peer feedback, and the incorporation of regular breakout room activities.

Structured introductions offer an essential opportunity for students to engage with and familiarise themselves with one another. Participating in “around the table” activities enable students to learn about each other, while more formal introductions create awareness of peers in an online environment. These types of activities can help lessen the initial reluctance to initiate connection and are appreciated by students, as demonstrated by Jessica's comment: “I think it's good to do like around the table. Who are you? Like, what's your story? Because while they're learning about you, you're also learning about the other students. I think that's valuable.”

Educator practices that foster peer-to-peer feedback encourage communication and enhance engagement among students. These structured feedback activities allow online students to be recognised by their peers as individuals with unique names

and personalities, similar to being physically present in a classroom, thus creating a more equivalent learning experience. Lauren described how participating in mandatory peer feedback enabled her to better connect with her peers online:

Where it's mandatory to upload things onto the forum and comment on things - I think that's when natural communication happens ... You get to learn their name and their style because they're constantly uploading their work and then commenting.

Creating smaller group work settings provides opportunities for initial conversations amongst students who might hesitate to engage in larger class settings. In an online setting, this can be achieved by utilising breakout rooms, which create comfortable spaces for initial peer introductions and dialogue. Structured breakout group sessions facilitate natural conversations equivalent to on-campus small group dynamics. Students recognised that breakout rooms were valuable to providing interaction opportunities, with Morgan stating, "I want [educators] to make use of Zoom's functions of breakout rooms ... I want to be able to do things with my peers."

Peer Visibility

Once an initial connection with peers is established, enabling peer visibility strengthens interpersonal connections between students. When educators create structured sharing opportunities—including individual feedback exchanges and broader class showcases—these initiatives bridge the visibility gap between online and on-campus learning environments. Rachel, who started her degree online before transitioning to on-campus study, clearly articulated how the lack of peer visibility created a significant equivalence gap in her learning experience:

Actually, the number one [difference] would be seeing other students' work, to compare yourself to others, and see what kind of level you're at. That was one thing I missed the most ... I've never seen anybody's assignments and didn't know, am I doing this right? Is this the way I should go?

In an online environment, fostering opportunities for students to share their work significantly increases their visibility to their peers, addressing the anonymity they often experience. These structured opportunities create legitimate reasons for interaction and help students discover a wider range of peers with similar interests or complementary skills. These formal interactions often develop into ongoing peer relationships that extend beyond the classroom. Rebecca explained how this visibility transformed into lasting connections:

Over the course of the year, as I got to know my peers online ... I felt like I had a shared experience with [them], and we built an online network ... Instead of having to wait to come to class ... I could just text them ... You could jump on Facebook or Teams ... and say, 'Hey, what's the answer to this question?'

On-campus students are inherently more aware of each other's struggles and progress by physically being in the same classroom. In contrast, online students often feel isolated in their challenges due to the absence of this visibility. Progress discussions and regular check-ins normalise students' struggles by making them visible. These reflective activities show students they are not alone and create an environment where they feel comfortable approaching peers for support. The normalising effect of these discussions was evident in Jordan's experience, where seeing peers struggle directly led to reaching out for help:

... People just going, "Yeah, you're doing a good job." ... Oh, thank God. I thought I was failing. ... Having that reinforcement kind of pushes you to keep going. ... I think it definitely adds to the motivation, but also... you go, "Oh, everyone else is having a shit time." ... Even these people are struggling with this. ... And I feel like that encourages me to ask them how they solved the problem.

Educator Presence

The educator practices discussed previously—creating informal conversation opportunities, facilitating initial connections, and enabling peer visibility—all require effective educator presence. Educator approachability, deliberately communicated through online interactions, fosters student engagement with both educators and classmates, creating a welcoming environment that supports the formation of peer connections. Morgan described how on-campus educators naturally create conditions for peer connection through their approachable presence:

I mean the lecturer is a big key ... being bright and welcoming and talkative ... before class, talking to them, getting everybody [to share] what's everyone up to? And then when you're in class, always opening things up to discussion, so that we're not just listening ... And checking in so that everyone is on top of it.

Students in this study identified several ways educators demonstrated approachability in online classes, including using friendly, conversational language in their communications and responding to messages with warmth and enthusiasm. They valued educators who took the time for informal chats before or after class and shared personal anecdotes that made their interactions feel more human. Additionally, simple gestures like addressing students by name and positively acknowledging their contributions enhanced the overall sense of approachability that educators conveyed. Sarah, an online student, emphasised how an educator's approachability fostered the conditions for peer connection:

I think [the educator] is excellent. I think she is really good at bringing the group together for conversations ... I found that she was really, really nice to work with, and I think that made everyone feel more comfortable and ready to chat.

Active facilitation of online discussions by educators stimulates meaningful peer-to-peer interactions by modelling engagement behaviours that students adopt with peers. Facilitation can take many forms, with students identifying effective practices from educators who regularly contribute to online discussion forums rather than just monitoring them. The way these educators engage differ. Techniques used that promoted peer-to-peer engagement include intentionally connecting students with similar interests or complementary skills, redirecting questions to other students to foster peer-to-peer interactions, and creating prompts that require students to respond to each other. However, it is important to know when to strike a balance between contributing to the discussion forums and guiding conversations without overshadowing them. Jordan revealed the importance of an educator in online discussions, emphasising how their presence enhanced student participation and encouraged peer feedback. This illustrates that active facilitation fosters stronger peer connections:

That was a great way to get feedback in between Zoom sessions, where we knew our lecturer was going to jump on and message us and we can have students giving their feedback. ... I checked it every day, multiple times a day, because there was actually stuff going on in there.

Educators foster a supportive environment where peer connections can flourish; online students value spaces where they feel comfortable reaching out to peers. Several specific approaches enhanced this experience: encouraging conversations that occasionally drifted beyond strictly academic topics, designing flexible breakout room activities, and demonstrating responsiveness to student feedback. By acknowledging the challenges unique to online learning and addressing student concerns promptly, educators fostered an atmosphere where peer relationships could develop naturally despite the absence of physical proximity.

Students frequently emphasised how these responsive strategies enhanced their online experience and promoted connections among peers. Rebecca noted that “the teacher doesn’t start teaching straight away, they have a bit of a chat with you,” fostering an atmosphere where students feel they are not “just talking into a void” (Jordan). This method effectively addresses what Jessica described as vital: the opportunity to “engage in the human side” of education, which significantly bolsters student engagement and peer relationships.

This aligns with what Garrison et al. (1999) described as “teaching presence” in online learning, which encompasses the design, facilitation, and direction of learning to foster engagement. Educator presence fosters peer communication by creating safe and responsive environments for student interaction through approachability and active facilitation.

Discussion

Our study reveals that when educators actively facilitate connection opportunities, students report developing meaningful peer relationships that provide equivalent academic and social-emotional benefits to those experienced on-campus. These findings suggest that the modal equivalence gap in peer connections can be bridged through deliberate educator intervention. Though educators often focus on specific teaching strategies like breakout rooms or structured feedback, this research reveals these practices serve a broader purpose: they act as catalysts for self-sustaining peer networks. This finding highlights why investing time in connection-building practices delivers benefits far beyond the immediate classroom environment.

Students identified four key areas where educators' practices effectively enabled the development of peer connections across both study modes. However, while these underlying elements remain the same, educator practices must adapt to achieve equivalent experiences in each mode. While we did not set out to examine teaching presence, students' descriptions of effective online educator practices align with Garrison et al.'s (1999) foundational concept of “teacher presence”—specifically, the importance of intentional course design (initial peer connections), facilitation of discourse (informal conversations and peer visibility), and active direction and support (educator presence) in fostering engagement. Stone and Springer's (2019) work further expands on these principles by exploring practical strategies that emphasise early intervention, inclusive design, and personalised communication to build interactivity and connectedness.

This alignment between Garrison's foundational theory, Stone and Springer's educator strategies, and student experiences underscores the critical role of intentional educator practices in scaffolding peer connections, regardless of the study mode. When comparing how students and educators described similar practices, it became clear that each group viewed the effectiveness of these practices through a different lens. Stone and Springer's (2019) study interviewed academic and professional staff about institutional and educational strategies for supporting online students, while our study focused on students' personal experiences of how educator practices directly shaped their ability to connect with peers. While Stone and Springer's study highlights the need for effective strategies, our participants described these practices in their own words—as one noted, practices that feel “human and nice” and valuing educators who “have a chat with you” rather than those who make them feel like they're “talking into a void”. Student voices confirm that practices educators believe are effective do indeed have a meaningful impact. More importantly, they reveal why these practices matter—because they transform online learning from an isolated experience into one where students can form the peer connections essential to their success, effectively bridging the equivalence gap.

Our findings on peer connection suggest that achieving equivalence across modes requires a “dynamic” rather than a “formal” approach similar to that used by translators (Smith, 2010). In the same way that translators must choose between the literal accuracy of a translation or ensuring the intent of the message is conveyed, educators must also choose whether to replicate face-to-face practices or develop different strategies for peer connection to achieve similar results. This dynamic equivalence is evident in our framework of educator practices. Where on-campus students naturally benefit from physical proximity for casual interactions, online educators could deliberately create unrecorded time before or after synchronous classes to achieve the equivalent outcome. Similarly, while peer visibility happens organically in physical classrooms, online educators could consciously design structured opportunities for students to share work. Rather than attempting to replicate the exact face-to-face experience (formal equivalence), these practices aim to produce equivalent educational outcomes through mode-appropriate means (dynamic equivalence).

This approach reflects Englund's (2005) definition of equivalence as creating alternative methods for achieving common educational goals, rather than uniformity of experience. It also aligns with Simonson et al.'s (1999) argument that learning events should offer experiences of equal value, even if they differ in form. Furthermore, this perspective complements the teaching presence literature (Garrison et al., 1999; Stone & Springer, 2019), which emphasises the importance of intentional, context-sensitive educator practices over direct replication of face-to-face methods.

While our framework identifies effective practices for creating equivalent peer connection opportunities, it is important to recognise that dynamic equivalence also requires contextualisation. The application of the framework may need to be tailored for different disciplines, cohorts and learning objectives, with educator experience being a critical factor in the ability to contextualise these practices successfully. As the literature on teaching presence suggests (Garrison et al., 1999; Stone & Springer, 2019), the ability of educators to design and facilitate peer connection is essential to designing and implementing effective, contextualised, educator practices that support equivalent peer connections. Less experienced educators may need targeted professional development or mentoring to do this effectively, particularly in an online setting where facilitating engagement and connections requires more deliberate design.

The digital media students involved in this study benefited from specific visual approaches to peer visibility, such as sharing design drafts with their peers for feedback. However, educators should adapt how they implement these practices rather than simply “plug and play” practices from other disciplines. This contextual adaptation represents another dimension of dynamic equivalence: practices must differ not only between online and on-campus environments but also be contextualised to specific educational settings. The framework provides principles that educators should thoughtfully contextualise instead of relying on formulaic techniques to be applied universally.

Implications

Although regulations such as the Higher Education Threshold Standards (TEQSA, 2021) prioritise equivalence in all study modes, our research indicates a notable gap between institutional metrics and student priorities. Students in this study seldom referred to conventional measures of equivalence, such as academic outcomes. Instead, they consistently identified factors that directly influenced the quality of their learning experiences, such as connection to peers, as fundamental to what constitutes equivalence across modes.

This discrepancy raises important questions about what we measure when evaluating equivalence and whose voice determines these metrics. Our research suggests that incorporating student perspectives on equivalence could significantly reshape how universities approach the design and evaluation of equivalent learning experiences, particularly in facilitating the meaningful

peer relationships that students identify as important to their educational journey. Without centring student voices in conversations about equivalence, universities risk satisfying regulatory requirements while overlooking the aspects of learning that students find most meaningful.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into students' perspectives on equivalence, several contextual limitations must be considered. The study focused on digital media students at a regional Australian university that utilised integrated delivery approaches and relatively small class sizes. Additionally, the visual and technical nature of digital media curricula creates unique peer interaction needs that may differ from other disciplines.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented both a limitation and an opportunity for this study, as many students who planned to study on-campus were forced online. This situation provided an opportunity to interview students who had studied in both modes with entirely different motivations (and perceptions) about studying online. While the use of constructivist grounded theory methodology provided rich insights, further research is needed to determine the transferability of the findings across different disciplines, institutional contexts and delivery models.

While this paper has focused specifically on peer connections as one dimension of educational equivalence, future research should expand upon other key equivalence factors identified in our theoretical coding process, including flexibility and help ecosystems. Exploring how students conceptualise these factors beyond traditional institutional understandings would provide a more comprehensive framework of educational equivalence that could transform multi-modal learning design.

Conclusion

While regulations like the Higher Education Threshold Standards (TEQSA, 2021) emphasise equivalence across all modes of study, our research reveals a significant disparity between institutional metrics and student priorities. On-campus students connect more naturally with peers through interactions around classes, whereas online students face barriers in establishing these connections. This disparity can lead to a pronounced modal equivalence gap that restricts online students' access to the academic and social-emotional benefits associated with peer relationships. However, our research shows that strong peer connections can be formed online when intentionally facilitated by the educator.

Bridging this equivalence gap in education requires adopting a dynamic equivalence approach similar to that employed by translators. By focusing on the four key areas outlined in the framework—informal conversations, initial connection opportunities, peer visibility, and educator presence—educators can develop intentional practices that are tailored not only to the mode of study but also to their specific discipline, cohort, and learning objectives. However, to successfully achieve this, universities will need to invest in the development of their educators. Our findings suggest that achieving equivalent peer connection experiences depends not only on knowing what practices work, but also on educators having the skills and confidence to effectively contextualise these practices.

This framework demonstrates that through deliberate educator practices, online students can develop the peer connections that normalise their experience, build their confidence, provide academic support, and create pathways to ongoing relationships. By implementing these evidence-based strategies, educators ensure all students—regardless of study mode—have equivalent access to the academic and social-emotional benefits that peer connections provide. This approach addresses what students themselves identify as meaningful equivalence, moving beyond institutional metrics to deliver the connected learning experience they value.

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Please cite this article as:

Roberts, M., Pace, S., & Johnson, A. (2025). Educators as connectors: Bridging the equivalence gap between online and face-to-face learning in tertiary education. *Student Success*, 16(2), 50–60. <https://doi.org/10.63608/ssj.3798>

This article has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *Student Success*. Please see the Editorial Policies under the ‘About’ section of the Journal website for further information.

Student Success: A journal exploring the experiences of students in tertiary education.



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