Using online discussion forums to promote student engagement in an academic literacies course

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ABSTRACT

The advent of Covid-19 forced universities worldwide to find ways of presenting content online that would otherwise have been facilitated in a face-to-face environment. A first-year literacy course at a South African university servicing a large number of B.Ed. students had traditionally relied on class discussions and small group work for clarification of concepts as well as the development of student writing. Online learning, however, made these practices very challenging, and subsequently online discussion forums were identified as a "second prize" way of achieving course outcomes that had traditionally happened in person. To our surprise, the online forums had affordances for the development of academic literacies, promoting student engagement and providing feedback that we had not anticipated. To investigate the reasons for this, focus group discussions were held with students. The feedback received from these focus group interviews confirmed our suspicion that online discussion forums must remain an integral part of our academic literacy course, even after all Covid-19 restrictions are lifted.

Keywords: online discussion forums, engagement, academic literacy, peer feedback, writing intensive course.

1. Introduction and background

In making a case for viewing language learning from a social constructivist perspective, Chen (2015:87) argues that "[l]inguistic meaning originates in the causal interaction of humans with the world, and in the social interaction of people with people". Within the field of literacy studies, the highly influential New Literacy Studies movement similarly views literacy as being inherently social and interactional, in addition to being "cognitive, … cultural, political, institutional, economic, moral, and historical" (Gee, 2008:2; also see Lea & Street, 2010 and Lillis, 2003). The rapid shift to online teaching and learning brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic caused an existential crisis for a first-year academic literacies course that is underpinned by both a social constructivist view of language and literacy, as well as the New Literacies approach, and which previously made extensive use of peer learning, facilitator-mediated small group discussions and group work to facilitate the acquisition of academic discourse(s). The course, as described in the course outline,

> explores all the various ways in which we interact with different kinds of text and use them in our learning and in our everyday lives. [Students] *learn to think theoretically about the literacies* that [they] need for [their] own studies and for teaching in [their] chosen subject disciplines, and also *practise using these literacies more effectively*. [Students] work critically with, evaluate and produce a range of texts across modes and literacies. (EDUC1280a course outline)

The aims of the course, taught to B.Ed. teachers-in-training, are firstly to develop students' understanding of the role of literacies in teaching and learning for themselves and their future learners in the classroom, and secondly to develop their own academic literacies and academic identity/ies to better acculturate them into the literacies needed at university level, thus helping to ensure success for the remainder of their university studies. Similar to a course described by Carstens (2014:73), the course which is the focus of this article also "overtly draws upon the … literacies students bring to the university, using these as a foundation for initiating them into the literacy practices of academia", thus "gradually initiating them into the critical reading and composition practices of academia" (Carstens, 2014:76). It also similarly uses the concept of identity as a catalyst for discussions surrounding academic literacy. On average, 400 first-year teachers-in-training enrol for this compulsory credit-bearing course each year. Traditionally, it had three 45-minute long contact sessions per week in groups of 100 students each. Students were expected to work independently for a further three hours per week.

The course was approved as a writing intensive course in 2020. This means that additional resources were allocated to the course to appoint senior students who could provide supplementary feedback to students' writing. The University of Minnesota's Campus Writing Board and Council on Liberal Education (2010) defines a writing intensive course as one

in which students are provided with explicit opportunities, though targeted instruction, to improve their writing. … Students must write at least 2500 words or the equivalent of finished writing … Instructors should provide substantial feedback on writing assignments, and allow revision in response to that feedback. Continuous, focused feedback building systematically over the course of the class is encouraged, as is a variety of modes and purposes of feedback.

Feedback is therefore central to writing intensive courses. It also plays a particularly important role in academic literacy interventions. Granville and Dison (2009:53), for example, argue that feedback forms "a 'vital link' between students' early experiences of a learning situation and the growth of understanding needed to make that learning meaningful". Ensambe (2018) adds that within collaborative teaching and learning environments, feedback allows students to rigorously engage with various aspects of academic literacy. Formative feedback, he argues, is a "transformative and an empowering approach" to teaching writing (Esambe, 2018:397).

Due to limited resources, such as a single course lecturer for approximately 400 students, writing fellows are drawn on to assist in providing feedback. Writing fellows at our institution are senior students who are appointed to assist on writing intensive courses. The writing in this course traditionally consisted of weekly worksheets, discussed and worked on collaboratively in tutorial sessions, which built towards a portfolio which was submitted at the end of each of the three 7-week terms in which the course ran. As a result of Covid-19 restrictions, however, all learning moved online for a period of two years. Academic literacy, which we view as a social construct, could no longer be acquired in the traditional social space of the classroom.

Similar to many other universities worldwide (Bülbül, Demirbaş & Odabaşi, 2021; Quadir & Zhou, 2021), South African universities were forced towards emergency remote teaching during the national lockdown in 2020, and many of these universities, including our institution, opted for teaching and learning to remain fully online until early 2022. Our institution strongly discouraged synchronous teaching of any kind, as students were scattered across the country, and unreliable infrastructure as well as high data costs would have led to our most vulnerable students being largely excluded from synchronous teaching opportunities. Furthermore, where attempts at synchronous teaching were made, particularly with first-year students, lecturers found the process frustrating and one-sided because of minimal student interaction. The expectation was that the quality of teaching and learning remained the same during that time – a feat that felt nearly impossible during emergency remote teaching.

In light of these realities, to replace both weekly worksheets, group work and class discussions, our academic literacies course elected to make extensive use of asynchronous online discussion forums (ODFs) in which students would answer weekly tasks and comment on fellow students' answers; Figures 1 and 2 provide examples of typical weekly ODFs.

Block 1 E-tivity 4.3: Writing effective paragraphs

All sections

1. Based on the sources you engaged with on the previous page, as well as your knowledge from high school, and other sources on paragraph writing you might find on the internet, make a bulleted list of the characteristics of good paragraph writing. You will only only be able to see group members' responses once you have posted your own.
2. Comment on the responses of two group members, indicating where you disagree with their lists, or where they identified points you did not think of.

Where should this activity be done? *Discussion forum*

Time required: *40 minutes*

Figure 1: First example of a weekly ODF

Block 4: E-tivity 2.3

All sections

For this week's discussion, use the following prompts to tell us about the genres and textual conventions in the subjects you are majoring in.

1. What kinds of reading, writing and language features are valued in the two disciplines you are majoring in?
2. What types of textual genres (you may also consider spoken genres) can be found in your major (the main subject you will be teaching at school)?
3. What are the typical language conventions that are used in these genres?
4. What types of knowledge are valued in your disciplines? Refer back to this week's narrated PowerPoint to revisit types of knowledge.
5. Compare your major and sub-major subjects. How are they similar, how are they different, in terms of discourse conventions used.?
6. How does acquiring the discourses in your two major subjects impact on your identity, as you firstly moved across borders into the university domain, and secondly into the domain of your chosen major (for example maths, natural sciences, IsiZulu, English, history...)?

You will once again only only be able to see group members' responses once you have posted your own. Comment on the responses of two group members.

Where should this activity be done? *Discussion forum*

Time required: *1 hour*

Figure 2: Second example of a weekly ODF

These ODFs would still build up to an online portfolio which was submitted at the end of each term. We considered using ODFs a poor second prize to the face-to-face discussions we were used to, and our initial sense was eager anticipation to when things could 'return to normal'. However, as we will argue in this paper, the affordances for developing students' academic discourse(s) provided by the ODFs caught us by surprise, and the instructors involved in this particular subject had a drastic change of heart with regard to how we would be going forward once all Covid-19 restrictions have been lifted. Based on the findings of this study, we argue for a blended approach to academic literacy development which makes use of the affordances offered by ODFs, while using contact sessions more judiciously than had traditionally been the case, to create a rich social constructivist environment in which academic literacies can best be developed.

Carstens' (2012) framework for integrating literacy studies into pre-service teacher education is insightful for our current research. Our focus on students linking their identities with theoretical concepts presented in the course speaks to valuing student literacies acquired in both formal and informal contexts. The students' sharing in the ODFs provided literacy narratives that "help them build a context for learning" (Carstens, 2012:22) which they could link to learning in other subjects. This paper starts by briefly considering language and literacy learning from a social constructivist framework. It then considers the implications of university

education increasingly moving to online modes, as well as the possible affordances of using ODFs. Thereafter, we describe our methodology, results and main findings.

2. Social constructivism and language learning

New Literacy studies moves language learning from focusing on the acquisition of skills to "literacy as a social practice" (Street, 2003). Literacy as a social practice can be explained using Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning that connects learning to dialogue and interaction. The overriding epistemology is social constructivism in which learning is considered a social and collaborative process in which learners at school level (and, we argue, university students) develop their knowledge first as an interpersonal process and secondly as an intrapersonal process (Vygotsky, 1978). In the interpersonal process, a student builds upon their previous knowledge through social interaction and dialogue. In the intrapersonal process, the student internalises knowledge through a scaffolded mediation of experts' or peers' knowledge that bridges a zone of proximal development – the gap between known and unknown.

The social constructivist approach to language and literacy learning is an active social process which involves students collaborating and interacting in real-life situations (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000). Language (the vehicle through which literacies, as sets of social practices, are acquired) as a social construct therefore means that individuals construct meaning, and acquire diverse literacies including academic literacies, through social interactions and social experiences. Students, with peers and instructors, interact as co-creators of knowledge. A social constructivist approach to online learning would require an interactive environment that appreciates multiple perspectives and encourages students' voices (Fleming, 2015; Honebein, 1996). With dialogue, an instructor creates a problem-solving environment and students collaboratively participate to develop solutions.

Queiros and de Villiers (2016) highlight the necessity of investigating social interaction in the context of distance and online learning. Such research would enable educators to provide students with the necessary support to ensure active participation. Writing within the context of teacher education, Kosnik, Menna, Dharamshi and Beck (2018) argue that an important element in this approach is finding ways of building a safe online community. ODFs have been favoured to create nurturing spaces for social interaction in online learning (Queiros & de Villiers, 2016). From a social constructivist perspective, ODFs provide the closest similarity to collaborative learning usually offered in face-to-face discussions (Muuro, Wagacha, Kihoro & Oboko, 2014). Student-lecturer contact, prompt feedback, cooperation and reciprocity between students are among the elements that contribute to a sense of community and collaboration in online interaction (Queiros & de Villiers, 2016).

3. The implications of university education increasingly moving to online modes

The advantages to online learning are well documented in the literature (see, for example, Aluko, Krull & Mhlanga, 2022; Basharina, 2009; Croft, Dalton & Grant, 2010). These have led to more and more calls from university administrators for a move to online learning. The South African minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, for example, has argued that "digital and online learning must become a standard part for the future higher education system" (Nzimande, 26 November 2020). Yet, many university lecturers still strongly resist this call. In South Africa, for example, more than 300 academics co-signed a statement which questioned "the quality and substance of the education" that took place during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic (Pikoli, 14 December 2020). The statement argues that "online learning radically diminished the experimentation with ideas, the critical peer-to-peer learning environments […and] the possibility of us learning from our students' lives and questions […]. Moving online narrows and limits the scope of education – and its worth". This statement specifically warns that the drive towards online learning might be to reduce "costly investments in classrooms and campus infrastructure, such as student residences, and for the importance of certification and numbers over the quality of our teaching" (Pikoli, 14 December 2020).

Ironically, and in line with the statement by South African academics, all the advantages to online learning regularly cited also point to at least some isolation of the student from the rest of the learning community. Croft *et al.* (2010) go so far as to say that these advantages can in fact ultimately be a great disservice to students. Isolation specifically deprives students of the complete learning experience, of interaction with other students and lecturers, of richly working collectively, and often, of the mental wellbeing that results from healthy face-to-face interactions (Croft *et al.*, 2010; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Fouché & Andrews, 2022; Pendry & Salvatore, 2015; Yang, Wen, Howley, Kraut & Rose, 2015). This might cause students to develop a negative perspective of a course (Yang *et al.*, 2015). Students often feel excluded and lonely because they are left to figure things out by themselves with no support from peers (Gillett-Swan, 2017), which can exacerbate their anxieties (cf. Bülbül *et al.*, 2021). The resultant sense of discouragement about the overall learning process might lead students to deregister or abandon their studies all together (Yang *et al.*, 2015).

Even if this does not happen, negative student perceptions of online courses have an effect on student agency. According to Ahearn (2010), agency is fuelled by both social and cultural factors. During the lockdown of South African university campuses, the sociocultural forces that students would typically experience were no longer there to impact on how student agency develops in a university setting. From a social constructivist perspective, many of the skills, attitudes and abilities that students would otherwise acquire and be enculturated into (cf. Gee, 2008) in a face-to-face environment had to be transmitted, in as much as was possible, through an online environment. One challenge that faced us as novice online educators was how to incorporate the continuous informal feedback students received in face-to-face classes into our

online course, to remain accountable to students. Accountability, according to Basharina (2009), is a vital component to agency. Students must be held accountable, but likewise, lecturing staff must reciprocate this accountability by giving students regular feedback. Feedback to students in an online environment is very important because it fosters a sense of approval, a sense of accountability and a sense of being part of a learning community (Waheed, 2017). Lack of feedback leads to students feeling lost and disempowered, which can result in them exerting negative forms of agency, like resistant agency (cf. Annala, Lindén, Mäkinen & Henriksson, 2021).

Successful learning happens when students learn new information and abilities, which, through a social constructivist lens, often happens by participating in discussions and through the critical thinking facilitated by this; in this way, students obtain personal growth (Croft *et al.*, 2010). It could be argued that pedagogies such as collaborative learning are particularly important for acquiring and mastering academic discourse, which is entirely a social construct. Interaction and collaboration have traditionally been essential tools in achieving this (Gillett-Swan, 2017). Our challenge was whether we could replicate this learning, within the context of an academic literacies course, in an online environment. Considering our institution's push towards asynchronous learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, ODFs were the only tool we had available that we believed could work towards this to some extent.

ODFs have been one way in which lecturers have been able to facilitate student participation in online learning (de Lima, Gerosa, Conte & De M Netto, 2019). ODFs have been used for some time as replicas of live conversions, self-assessment and formulation of ideas through discourse (Seethamraju, 2014). The Covid-19 pandemic has forced many institutions, including our own, to use ODFs for exactly this purpose. Numerous challenges to, as well as affordances of using ODFs have been cited in the literature.

Many students who come from secondary school struggle to adapt to online learning, which might hinder their full participation in ODFs (Yang et al., 2015). Poorly scaffolded ODFs that do not take these students into account might leave students puzzled regarding what to post or how to access content in ODFs, resulting in students feeling confused or frustrated, losing interest and not being interactive (Yang *et al.*, 2015). Well-structured ODFs, however, can have various advantages in promoting students' learning.

Practical advantages of ODFs include that they enable discussions to take place at times convenient to the student, and can accommodate students' personal circumstances, thus providing flexible learning opportunities for large groups of students (de Lima *et al.*, 2019; Kim, 2013; Ryan, 2013). In face-to-face discussions, participants can only talk one at a time; in asynchronous ODFs, however, "there is no need to wait for one's turn, which makes it easier for shy students who tend to avoid taking their turns in face-to-face interactions" (Basharina, 2009:391). The fact that other students cannot see their faces helps some students to be more expressive in online forums (Nandi, Hamilton & Harland, 2012; Nor, Razak & Aziz, 2010; Pendry & Salvatore, 2015); something that is particularly important in language and literacy

classrooms. In fact, Kim (2013) argues that ODFs are particularly useful in large classes for developing students' writing skills – the mode of expression that is typically most valued when students are assessed. Further, the affordance that online forum discussion can be permanently stored means that students can revisit these at later stages, and re-engage with the content whenever they need to (Basharina, 2009; de Lima *et al.*, 2019), which is rarely possible in face-to-face discussions. At a sociocultural level, Pendry and Salvatore (2015) argue that ODFs where students are fully engaged can lead to them formulating a collective identity with other students in the course; they become a community with the ODF bringing them together in a digital space.

ODFs can further provide numerous pedagogical advantages that might not be as easy to replicate in face-to-face learning. For example, ODFs can give students the opportunity to think through ideas before posting these, take time to understand other students' responses, respond to questions asked, express themselves in detail, and encourage them to write reflections, share knowledge, ideas and point of views (Basharina, 2009; de Lima *et al.*, 2019; Ryan, 2013). In class discussions, we find that only a small number of students truly participate in discussions, with the majority of students passively listening to these discussions. In line with this, Nor *et al.* (2010) argue that ODFs can in fact promote collaborative learning.

The written responses that students must engage in as part of participating in ODFs can sharpen their writing, communication, thinking and problem-solving skills (Patel, 2021; Seethamraju, 2014). A study by Cheng, Paré, Collimore and Joordens (2011) indicates that even when lecturers do not provide individual feedback in ODFs and spend relatively little time on them, these forums still greatly benefit students' reading and writing skills. The study further indicates a positive correlation between students' interaction in online forums and their grades. In addition, ODFs can be used by instructors to identify and resolve challenges students have in their academic tasks (De Lima *et al.*, 2019; Waheed, 2017). Nor *et al.* (2010) argue that ODFs have transformed how students provide feedback to peers. Constructive responses to students can inspire high-order cognitive skills and interaction (Ryan, 2013); however, if students' responses are ignored, they will feel excluded and isolated (de Lima *et al.*, 2019). De Lima *et al.* (2019), in line with the social constructivist lens used in the current study, further argue that these forums can help students work together effectively whilst providing support to each other. They allow for a re-structured "author-text-reader relationship … allowing a degree of textual malleability, in terms of both production and interpretation" (Rassool, 1999:203). Our study was interested in the extent to which ODFs facilitated engagement for South African students doing an academic literacy course, which had previously heavily relied on the co-construction of knowledge in face-to-face environments.

4. Methodology

This study followed a qualitative approach, using focus group discussions to obtain rich data which would allow us to better understand students' experiences of participating in ODFs. We

selected focus group discussions as our data collection method because "they can 'give voice' to voices that would not otherwise be heard" (Morgan, 1996:20). Four online focus group discussions were held with students using a video-conferencing platform – this was because when this research was conducted at the end of 2021, our university was still operating fully online. Sessions were typically attended by ten to twelve students; thus, approximately 45 students attended the sessions, though the number of participants varied throughout the session due to connectivity issues. Convenience sampling was used for this study – students volunteered to participate in the focus group discussions. All focus group participants were studying towards a Bachelor of Education degree in the SP/FET phases, meaning that the academic literacies course under discussion was one of their core subjects. The majority of the participants were Black students (here used to include Coloured and Indian students), in addition to two white students. Focus group discussions were led by either the course lecturer or an experienced writing fellow. Students were encouraged to draw on translanguaging strategies as described by Carstens (2015:27), "even where the lecturer [or interviewer, in this case] is not multilingual; utilising … students' multilingual abilities". Drawing on translanguaging strategies allowed students to better express themselves. The discussions were transcribed by an individual fluent in the South African languages students used during the discussion; the transcriber translated these instances. Transcribed discussions were coded by emerging themes related to the objectives of the study.

Focus groups typically generate participant engagement; however, it should be noted that the online format of the focus group discussions presented significant challenges. Despite repeatedly requesting students to keep their videos and audio on throughout the discussion to facilitate engagement, almost no students did so. In some cases, this might have been due to connectivity and network issues; in addition to large sections of South Africa having poor internet infrastructure, the country also experienced scheduled power cuts (called loadshedding) during this time. However, in our experience, students have also been hesitant to engage in synchronous online sessions, and this was definitely the case with the focus group discussions. It is easier to 'hide' behind a computer screen than it is in a small-group face-to-face discussion which has affordances such as eye contact and increased social interaction. All three researchers who led the respective discussions found it exceptionally effortful to get students to engage. In each discussion, students were eventually encouraged to type responses if they did not want to speak; these written responses would be read by the person leading the discussion to prompt further discussion, and were also transcribed. In each discussion, only some of the students participated in either spoken or written mode; even when non-participating students were asked their opinions, they often just stayed silent. Across the various focus group discussions, we were able to sufficiently gather data and engage with student voices for this analysis. However, we would strongly advise future researchers against conducting online focus group discussions, if there is the possibility of doing these in person.

In the focus group discussion, participants were asked the following questions:

1. What was the value of the subject in preparing you for your studies?

2. What did you find most challenging / least valuable in the course?
3. Tell us about your participation in the ODFs – did you find these valuable or not, and why?

Questions were open-ended to ensure that we did not influence students' responses. Where students raised interesting themes, the interviewer would ask relevant follow-up questions. Bolded sections within student quotations in Section 5 are emphasis added by the authors. The main themes that emerged from the discussions, discussed in more detail in the next sections, are 'enhancing understanding', 'feedback from peers and writing fellows', 'applying academic literacy competencies to other contexts' and 'a development of critical analysis'.

Several steps were taken to ensure that the study was conducted ethically. The privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, and vulnerability of our participants was considered throughout (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). We first obtained approval from the University's Ethics and Research Committee. Thereafter, we requested informed consent, in writing, from each participant. Only data from students who were willing to give informed consent was used for this study. This included ensuring that the participants understood additional ethical implications of virtual research. We removed any personal identifying information and restricted access to the ODF data, in line with the university's ethical guidelines. Another important aspect to keep in mind in quantitative research is that of trustworthiness, which includes considering the dependability and confirmability of the study (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). Towards, this end, we established an audit trail by keeping records of the raw data. We shared with each other our individual reflexive accounts of the research process. The findings we present in the following section can be traced by another researcher using the same data and perspective.

5. Data discussion and analysis

As a platform from which to acquire and incorporate academic literacy skills, the course dealt with a fair amount of theory and concepts regarding literacies and identity. ODFs (from the second week onwards) were set up so that students had to first post their own answers to carefully scaffolded leading questions before they could see other students' answers. This was done to compel them to think about these questions themselves, and phrase their answers in writing, before being influenced by the answers of peers; see Figures 1 and 2 for an example of the instructions in one of the ODFs. Students were divided into groups of approximately 30 students, with two of these groups assigned to each writing fellow; per group, writing fellows were paid for approximately one hour per week in which they could provide additional feedback on that group's ODF. Students received a mark of 10% for participating in weekly forums as well as responding to the answers of two other students, thus obliging them to read responses other than their own once they have posted their answers.

In this section, we discuss the four key themes that emerged from our analysis of the focus group discussions. After analysing the transcribed focus group discussions and coding relevant

sections, related codes were grouped into these emerging themes. Below, under each theme, we present a selection of student quotations, taken from across the four focus group discussions, and we analyse these themes at the hand of the literature reviewed in this article.

The four themes were as follows:

- Theme 1: Enhanced understanding
- Theme 2: Feedback from peers and writing fellows
- Theme 3: Applying academic literacy competencies to other contexts
- Theme 4: A development of critical analysis

Theme 1: Enhanced understanding

The first theme that strongly emerged from our data was, as one student aptly said, that ODFs were effective "*to enhance your understanding*" of course content. Several other similar responses are captured in Figure 3.

Student 1: *You know, sometimes it's not always that you do understand the lecture's explanation, so when you write your own [answer] according to your own understanding and then you view other people's answers and then **you get to understand even better** because sometimes **the kind of the level of English the lecturer uses is not the same as the level of English your** peers or any other student uses.*

Student 2: *They [peers] sometimes simplify things to be easy for you to understand when you read their answers.*

Student 3: *The online discussions, I will say they were really helpful because that's where I could understand better some of the concepts because honestly in the presentation, the slides that represented there [were not always clear].*

Student 4: *From the discussions I could get to see* other people's opinions about the content **and I could get a clear or a better understanding** *about what the concepts are really about. So, I'll think it was very helpful to me. They were very helpful the discussions.*

Student 5: *The discussion forums were a great thing for us because I think when you are studying or you like going out reading the lecture slides, you can understand certain concepts or terms to a certain point and reading other people's ideas or their own responses helps you. It is also beneficial to you because **you get to understand some of the information from another person's point of view.** So, that is like yeah, very beneficial for me.*

Student 6: *Sometimes it would make you feel bad because you don't know what you want to say and someone just say exactly what [you] were wanting to say.*

Figure 3: Focus group extracts under the theme 'enhanced understanding'

A valuable affordance of students having to read responses other than their own was that they were presented with various explanations of concepts in addition to those of the lecturer. This emerges strongly from the responses of students 1 to 5. Many students agreed that reading the responses of peers often made course content more digestible, either because they received a greater variety of input and explanations of certain concepts, or because they were exposed to different points of view. Furthermore, the ODFs allowed a scaffolded approach to academic discourse, in that the language used by students in their posts allowed for a bridge between the

academic discourse used in online lectures, and the discourses students had been familiar with up to that point, as can be seen in Student 1's response.

As argued by Seethamraju (2014), it becomes clear that ODFs in this course fulfilled the role of self-assessment, and at least to some extent acted as replicas of live conversations. Several students struggled to understand the course content presented in an online format, a context largely devoid of the social interaction and dialogue that would likely have happened in a face-to-face context structured around social constructivism. The additional engagement with this content in the community of the ODFs helped many students to better engage with the content.

It is important to note that not all students had a positive experience of having to share their work on discussion forms, as indicated by Student 6. Being forced to publically display their work, and realising that they are less well-spoken than other students, or that they have failed to grasp the work, can lead to poor self-esteem for some students, which might result in a negative attitude towards the course. Contrary to Waheed's (2017) claim that having the same answer as peers can foster a sense of approval, the varying levels of academic English competency among South African students, and the public nature of ODFs, could instead lead to anxiety (cf. Bülbül *et al.*, 2021), as indicated by Student 6. This is not a disadvantage we could find in the literature on the topic, but it is particularly pertinent in a developing country like South Africa where the hegemony of English, and specifically formal academic English, still goes hand-in-hand with the colonial heritage of our universities (Carstens, 2015). Not speaking dominant varieties of English, or not being fully proficient in the language, can act as gate-keeping mechanisms, denying students "conceptual access" to higher education (Carstens, 2015:2). This is particularly problematic if literacy is considered as a social practice, as it is in the course under discussion. This view recognises multiple literacies, and requires asking the question of whose literacies are dominant and whose are marginalised or resisted (Street, 2003). While the course needed to be adaptive to students' needs and the realities of having to complete degrees in English, we also couldn't ignore the perspective that formal English and academic English are a western conception of literacy. This is contrary to Waheed's (2017) claim that having the same answer fosters a sense of approval, in this case it made students anxious.

This, ultimately, is one of the greatest challenges of academic literacy courses in South Africa – to both value students' lived realities, cultural capitals (Yosso, 2005) and own literacies (Street, 2003), while also empowering them to obtain access to academic discourse and thus be in a better position to successfully complete their higher education studies, without alienating them in the process. Basharina (2009) argues that online learning can offer authentic engagement opportunities in the target language and that online interaction has the potential to deepen students' use of the target language, as long as there is a balance between a well-structured course from instructors and freedom of expression by students. In our course, we attempted to facilitate this through a process of scaffolding. As mentioned in Section 5, we scaffolded participation in forums by letting students see their peers' responses before posting their own in the first week of classes. It might be necessary to extend this structure into the first

few weeks to allow more academically vulnerable students to gain some confidence before expecting them to formulate answers without peers' guidance in ODFs. Secondly, students' acquisition of new discourses was scaffolded through feedback from both peers and writing fellows. Writing fellows scaffolded students' acquisition of academic discourse by using a conversational tone in their comments and questions, in an effort to be perceptive of the cultural and ideological assumptions of literacy (Street, 2003). They often used constructive praise as a strategy in their comments to lead to self-confidence and self-regulation in students, in line with the suggestions by Rambiritch and Carstens (2021), to help students bridge the divide between their current literacies, and those they are in the process of acquiring. This second level of scaffolding is the topic of the second major theme identified from the focus group discussions (see Section 5, Theme 2).

A few related subthemes also emerged from students' responses, as indicated in Figure 4.

Student 7: *When you give us the activities to write, **even when I do not understand, I normally write what I think** and then I go to other people's response and find out what they actually think. From there I gain a lot.*

Student 8: *I believe **they trained us** in understanding the concept. Cause now we going to write an essay and we are more familiar with the concept because we were asked in the discussion forum.*

Student 9: *The discussions forums for me were very important because I was able to **interact** **with my peers** to get corrections from what I've written to see where I did not do it; they were very important.*

Student 10: *As for me, online discussion forums were very effective in terms of (...) I notice that **you get help from other students and even the [writing fellow] him or herself**. So, I think they're very effective cause yeah, most of the things we will understand them in the discussion forum. So, I think it was very effective to interact with the other students and the [writing fellows].*

Figure 4: Focus group extracts under the theme 'enhanced understanding' – additional subthemes

As indicated by Students 7 and 8, and also Student 6's more negative response to the forums, the ODF compelled students to make an attempt at responding to prompts when otherwise they might have been scared of not understanding everything, and therefore may have opted to be passive receivers, listening in on the conversations of others. By having to formulate their ideas through discourse, in the process practicing their academic writing, thinking and problem solving abilities (Seethamraju, 2014), students could experiment with their academic voice, thus increasingly gaining access to academic discourse. In addition, by seeing exemplars of their peers' responses, students could build on these attempts at academic discourse to develop their own academic discourse, as can be inferred from Student 6's response.

Students 9 and 10 foregrounded the intra-peer and student-teacher interactions that were facilitated through the ODFs. From a social constructivist approach, forums therefore acted as micro-communities, echoing Pendry and Salvatore's (2015) stance that online forums become the pivot for community formation; in this case, a type of community of practice where students model academic discourse and engagement with knowledge for each other.

Theme 2: Feedback from peers and writing fellows

In the weekly ODFs, the students had to give feedback to each other. The students were placed into groups of less than 30 students. The feedback was based on each student's response to the weekly task.

As previously mentioned, feedback is a huge component of students' development in their academic journey (Basharina, 2009). Feedback motivates students to keep posting their responses in ODFs and makes them feel they have an obligation not only to themselves but to other students as well (Basharina, 2009), thus working towards the building of learning communities. We consider feedback at two levels: 1) peer feedback and 2) writing fellow feedback.

As can be seen from the issues raised by the selected focus group extracts in Figure 5, in response to the interviewer asking students about peer feedback, while students had mixed perceptions regarding peer feedback, the majority of them did not find this level of feedback to be constructive.

Student 1: *I think it was helpful.*

Student 2: *In the discussions part we were asked to comment on other students writing and* **students they just come and say that everything is okay.** *They would say "great effort" (codeswitches) there you can see that this person didn't read this. How can it be everything okay, when, when I was writing this thing I was not even sure about some concepts you know.* **I feel like if maybe we can be writing only to the tutor or to the writing fellow.** *... I think maybe it's because sometimes we just have, we are rushing (codeswitches) the due dates, so you just go there. You won't even read it. You just gonna say "hello everything is OK. Great effort." And then it ends there.*

Student 3: *As [student 2] said that you know? Sometimes you think you understood and then*

you go to write you are not sure and then you expect people to correct you and then they just say "good". ... It's like there, there it is a response that I was expecting and then they never like highlight ... what you're doing wrong, they always like say everything is good yeah, good work. I think that's the only thing that really is challenging. ... Maybe there should be also like questions: "What point do you agree with or disagree with", yeah, then you have to look at someone's work.

Student 4: *Look for your point. (codeswitches) that you agree with and a point that you don't agree with, and then if someone ... makes a mistake or they don't explain well and then there should be a question that guides you to actually look into to a person's work so that you give them a correct feedback.*

Figure 5: Focus group extracts under the theme 'feedback from peers and writing fellows' – peer feedback

Peer feedback can be seen as a way for students to reflect on the work they have written in the ODFs, which can assist them in learning effectively online (Hughes & Price, 2019). While some students, like Student 1, did experience peer feedback as useful, responses such as those from Students 2, 3 and 4 highlighted several problems with how peer feedback was provided. Students 2 and 3 highlight what many other students voiced: that peer feedback was generally not constructive. Constructive feedback would entail students identifying similarities and

differences between produced work and the required standards (Hughes & Price, 2019). The lack of constructive peer feedback, in turn, seems to have elicited negative forms of agency in students (cf. Annala *et al.*, 2021), making them resistant to the very idea of peer feedback. Instead of a democratic, student-centred online learning environment, this seems to have solidified in students' minds that knowledge lies only with the instructor, and that teaching and learning should be top-down events (cf. Carstens, 2008a), as exemplified by Student 2's response.

Peer feedback, of course, has value beyond the actual feedback provided. Providing feedback on academic writing could be considered a convention that students need to be socialised into, and trained to do. It is often not a skill with which students arrive at university, and it requires scaffolding and practice, as is the case with acquiring any discourse. Hughes and Price (2019) argue that when students give others feedback it is of greater benefit to them than when they obtain feedback from their peers; if used properly, peer feedback can enable students to identify challenges and gaps in the work of others that they would not have picked up in their own work. However, the absence of constructive feedback that is evident from student responses above would indicate that this likely did not happen for many students. There were likely several contributing factors that led to this. As Student 2 indicates, university deadlines and time management challenges might have prevented students from truly engaging; importantly, the 10% participation mark students received was not structured in such a way to measure the quality of student responses, which likely facilitated superficial, non-constructive feedback. Furthermore, novice students are often afraid of being critical towards one another. Blackmon (2012), for example, argues that some students see ODFs as a way to socialise with other students using course related topics. Critical feedback, she posits, can be seen as upsetting to social relations within student communities. Passive and positive feedback, in turn, can assist students in maintaining good peer relationships (Blackmon, 2012). Students might also lack confidence in their own responses, and a more extensive response might expose the gaps in their own understanding, thus embarrassing them.

Student 4 provides useful suggestions for restructuring the way peer feedback in structured, namely having questions that guide students as they give feedback to their peers. If peer feedback is seen as an academic convention that should be practiced and scaffolded, as argued above, then this feedback should indeed be structured as carefully as the original ODF tasks were, to systematically socialise students into this aspect of academic discourse. Participation marks, which we found to drastically increase both student participation and quality of participation in forum tasks, could also be structured more carefully to reflect the quality of both students' own responses as well as their feedback to peers. An obstacle in this is the administration required to do this well in a large course such as ours, with minimal resources. Improved ways of developing peer feedback strategies therefore need to be investigated further.

The second level of feedback that emerged from student responses was that from writing fellows. The writing fellows are an important component of our course. In addition to providing unique and fresh perspectives from a more experienced student, they also acted as overseers in the ODFs to ensure that all students were actively engaged and that there was no cyberbullying or inappropriate conversations taking place. Though most students responded positively to writing fellow feedback (similar to findings by Carstens, 2014 on students appreciating the mentorship of peer tutors), there were some exceptions, mainly related to misunderstanding the role of writing fellows and their feedback; selected extracts on this theme are included in Figure 6.

Student 5: *Oh yeah, I think that they did help me because ... like when we do discussions and then* **we reflect or like we compare our answers to our fellows that helped us a lot**. *Like, that helped me.*

Student 6: *Academic writing follows a strict rule ... such as writing format and ... formality...* **Through the discussion forum our writing fellows are able to rectify us to stay on the right track of writing**. *... I really found my writing fellow useful because he was the only one who was* responding *properly to my discussion post.*

Student 7: ***I was expecting my [writing fellow] to tell me that no, you're wrong here go and improve here. That is a constructive feedback.*** *So, if you just going to tell me that no that's your essay is redundant. Like how am I supposed to know where I'm wrong at? Like just tell me to the point. This is where you are wrong like I think. The lecture should consider ... just [getting] tutors that are not students.*

Figure 6: Focus group extracts under the theme 'feedback from peers and writing fellows' – writing fellow feedback

It is interesting to observe that some students do not consider writing fellows as peers, even though they are usually only two or three years older than the students themselves, as can be seen in Student 5's comment, which again indicates a strong preference for a top-down teaching and learning approach. However, writing fellows are peers in many ways, and act as a source of peer feedback with the potential of cultivating interactive discussions, logical reasoning and in-depth discussions (cf. Mwalongo, 2012), helping students to collaborate with other aspiring academics (Smith, 2019). Other students do view writing fellows as peers, and as a result do not consider them qualified enough to provide feedback, as can be seen in Student 6's comment. The desire for a top-down approach is again evident in this student's comment, showing a desire for a directive tutoring approach rather than a non-directive one (see Carstens & Rambiritich, 2021 for a discussion of these two styles of tutoring). There is therefore likely a misconception of the role of writing fellows among several students, as there is of the nature of academic discourse, and that feedback must sometimes be more nuanced than declaring something right or wrong. Discussions with students about the nature of academic writing, and the process that experienced academic writers follow, in addition to the roles of various role players in the course (peers, writing fellows, instructors) might go far to address these misconceptions. However, one might also consider Carstens and Rambiritich's (2021:165)

argument that there might be a place for some directive tutoring, which could "compositionally become a speech event for creating spaces for co-construction of meaning". This is an area that deserves further research.

Theme 3: Applying academic literacy competencies to other contexts

The applicability of university-based pre-service teacher education has been cited as a major concern in South Africa and elsewhere; a concern that can be addressed through "research-led teacher education" (Venkat & Osman, 2012). The concept of transferability and applicability is of particular concern to academic literacy courses; if students are unable to consciously apply the discourses and competencies acquired in these courses to their other subjects, it becomes difficult to make claims about the impact, and thus value, of these courses.

Student 1: *Maths and technology … most of the time we do like calculations. We do not write like academically.* **So, …what this course helped me is with my essays in Education I.** *That is why I am trying. [Since] I will write essays every year, I will do academic writing, I am trying my best.*

Student 2: *[Studying] identity I found most useful* **for how you transition from being a student to being a teacher** *and also how we were taught* **academic writing, we can use that for our other courses.**

Student 3: *I did find them useful … because* **they were helping us to think critically** *when we are* answering these discussions and the good thing is now, we are able to construct a paragraphs and so on. **Without these discussions I do not think we will make it.**

Student 4: *This course has taught me a lot,* **particularly as a future teacher.** *In an instance that I have to consider diversity and different identities within the classroom setting … I have to consider the different types of identities the learners have acquired from their personal experiences, their academic learning and from their peers in general. … .As well as the knowledge … gained from class in constructing their academic writing.*

Figure 7: Focus group extracts under the theme 'applying academic literacy competencies to other contexts'

The focus group interviews provided evidence (see Figure 7) that students link the writing intensive feature of the ODFs to the writing expectations in other courses which rely on extended writing as the primary mode of knowledge transmission, as can be observed in the comments by Students 1 and 2. The fact that the discussion forums, through carefully scaffolded questions, helped students to develop their critical thinking and writing competencies, as exemplified by the response of Student 3, indicates a conscious awareness from students about how the academic literacies course, specifically through the tool of ODFs, provided them with access to academic discourses (cf. Gee, 2008; Street, 2003). As this student poignantly states, *Without these discussions, I do not think we will make it.* All of the extracts

in Figure 7 display an awareness of improved writing abilities (and thus access to academic discourses), which supports the arguments of Kim (2013), Cheng *et al.* (2011) and Seethamraju (2014) that ODFs are particularly suitable to developing students' writing skills in large classes.

Student 2 and 4's comments serve as an example of a subtheme that emerged – that the course helped students towards developing their own identities as future teachers, and of how they would in turn interact with their future learners, based on what they learned in the course. This points to the course fostering positive forms of agency, in both the realms of students' current studies and their future careers (cf. Ahearn, 2010; Basharina, 2009). Though ODFs were not explicitly mentioned in these comments, it is through discussion forums that dialogic interaction and construction of meaning happened, and thus through which students were enabled to better understand some of the theoretical constructs surrounding identity and literacies which were introduced in the course, as shown in Theme 1. Students making links to other courses and their future careers could be a predictor of their interest and continued participation in the course. By making the focus of students' journeys, from high school learners to students to teachers, the focus of the ODFs, students become co-creators of knowledge as an interactive and ongoing process. This creates an environment in which they are enabled to display something akin to Annala *et al.'s* (2021) conception of progressive agency. Progressive agency appears as an interest in "learning in teaching in general, [and] readiness to take responsibility … and valuing education" (we apply the term that was used to describe a type of agency in lecturers to student agency here). The affordance of ODFs of getting all students to engage dialogically, rather than just a handful of them in a large class, has the potential of leading to deep approaches to learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011) for a much broader range of students than might otherwise have been possible.

Theme 4: A development of critical analysis

As argued inTheme 2, one outcome of providing peer feedback is that it offers students opportunities for reflecting on their own work, by comparing what they have done to what others have done. Further, according to Mitoumba-Tindy (2017:75), probing questions from peer consultants such as writing fellows "invite [students] to think critically or evaluate their work with new eyes". In the extracts contained in Figure 8, students appreciate this reciprocity as an invitation to reflect on their own writing

Student 1: *What I found uh very useful about (codeswitches)* **the discussion forums** *is the fact that when you get* **there you get to see how other people view a certain concept or a certain question** *which … would show you a possible way of thinking about it. You …* **basically move away from how you would generally or normally see things** *or write in a particular way.*

Student 2: *….. It invites you to, to basically look at how someone else would see it. So,* **it basically like opens your mind** *and also shows you that this is also another way of writing it, yeah.*

Student 3: *And you also are able to do the very thing,* **to critically analyse someone else's response** *and see how they are able to think and comprehend all of that information that they have gained from the content of that week.*

Student 4: *No, no I think it was fine the way it was [to write first then see other students responses] because sometimes I feel if [I saw others' responses you would be] spoon feeding us so now, we can't get to think critically. So, I think it was fine like that although it was Yoh!*

Figure 8: Focus group extracts under the theme 'a development of critical analysis'

The metacognitive awareness displayed by students, as indicated by these extracts, points to an affordance of ODFs that we had not experienced in traditional face-to-face iterations of the course. Though we had made use of peer feedback in classroom settings, the affordances of ODFs of giving students time to construct their own responses and to reflect on the responses of others, to structurally elicit active engagement from all students rather than just a select few, and of students' being able to revisit these discussions (Basharina, 2009; de Lima *et al.*, 2019; Ryan, 2013), would seem to have contributed to a level of critical thinking, and an awareness thereof, that caught us by surprise. We believe that this led to more engaged students than we had ever experienced in the traditional iterations of the course. The engagement brings out the purposes of writing intensive courses as safe spaces for writing as thinking, where students can experiment and consider novel perspectives (Nichols, 2017). This journey was not easy, as can be seen in Student 4's contribution that ends with *Yoh!*, an exclamation which indicates that the interaction was not easy. Discussion forums, however, acted as vehicles to help students traverse the zone of proximal development, constructing new knowledge through interaction with peers and instructors in an environment that facilitates engagement.

6. Conclusion

In many South African universities, online learning is still relatively new, and despite having to rely on this mode of teaching and learning for the past two years, there is still much resistance towards it from many lecturers. Our experience of one instrument within the arsenal of online learning, namely discussion forums, and as reflected in student comments from the focus groups used for this study, has been that ODFs in particular have been surprisingly effective in promoting student engagement with course content in several ways. They assisted students in better understanding course content. They provided a collaborative environment where students could experiment with academic discourse(s) in a relatively safe space. They gave students more opportunity to write extensively than had been the case in purely face-to-face

iterations of the course, in line with the outcomes of writing intensive courses (cf. Nichols, 2017); Carstens, for example, has found across several studies the importance of having ample opportunity for practicing writing in the development of academic writing skills (Carstens, 2011; Carstens & Fletcher, 2009). ODFs provided students with real-life exemplars against which they could measure both their own interpretations of ideas, and their own academic writing proficiencies. They exposed students to plurality of thought. They helped to foster critical thinking, and helped students to take ownership of the content and competencies that were the outcomes of the course, thus promoting positive forms of agency. Based on these affordances, which we did not experience to nearly the same degree in previous face-to-face versions of the course, ODFs will remain an integral part of our pedagogy going forward. To return to a quotation from our analysis, this student encapsulates some of the most valuable aspects of the ODFs: *I did find them useful … because* ***they were helping us to think critically*** *when we are answering these discussions and the good thing is now, we are able to construct a paragraphs and so on.* ***Without these discussions I do not think we will make it***.

The ODFs were not without challenges, however, the most prominent of which emerged from our research being students' negative experiences of receiving superficial, and non-constructive peer feedback. We agree with Carstens (2014) that it is necessary that collaboration with peers must be managed effectively, and this is an aspect that will need to be addressed more explicitly in the pedagogy of the course, while students will have to be guided and trained more effectively in providing this type of feedback. At the same time, discussions should be had with students about the affordances of peer feedback, and that the value lies as much in providing feedback as it does in receiving feedback.

The main limitation of this study is that it relies on self-reported data. Future research should triangulate such data with examples of student writing, to determine whether findings could be verified by looking at students' actual writing. Furthermore, students volunteering to be part of focus groups might not be representative of the entire cohort of students; findings should therefore be treated with some caution. Also, as mentioned earlier in this article, while the online environment might be an effective space for developing student writing, we did not find it conducive for conducting focus group discussions. A richer discussion might have emerged had the focus group discussions been held in person – an option that was not open to us due to Covid-19 restrictions when we were gathering this data. Finally, the research was conducted within a fully online context during the Covid-19 pandemic – a context which traditional contact universities might not face again. Therefore, further research needs to be conducted to determine how the affordances of ODFs could best be drawn on in whichever shape university teaching and learning end up taking, post-pandemic. Therein lies a key argument for this paper.

We do not argue for fully online learning. In fact, much evidence is emerging post the Covid-19 pandemic that online learning leads to inferior learning when compared to face-to-face learning, as argued by the academics quoted in Pikoli (14 December 2020). However, we do argue that some aspects of online learning, like the ODFs which were the focus of this article, could be successfully integrated into university courses, and academic literacy courses in

particular, to foster the development of academic discourses and promote student engagement. ODFs facilitate the use of the most frequently used rhetorical modes in the humanities and the social sciences, namely discussion, analysis, argumentation, explanation and description (Carstens, 2008b). They make this possible without necessarily putting an additional assessment burden on lecturers, while also creating a community of practice for students in which they can experiment with their emerging academic voices while forming what Pendry and Salvatore (2015) call a collective identity with other students in the course, all of which could result in decreased student anxiety and feelings of isolation. Face-to-face sessions could be used more judiciously, potentially in a flipped classroom pedagogy, to collaboratively reflect on discussions in ODFs, or to train students in aspects such as effective peer feedback. Feedback from this study does point to ODFs having the potential of being rich social constructivist environments which are ideal for the development of academic literacy competencies, thus better supporting students to successfully complete their academic journeys.

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