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Pseudo social media classrooms: Student perceptions of engagement techniques in an online academic literacy class

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ABSTRACT

In the academic literacy (AL) class, fostering engagement between educators and students in the online environment is challenging. However, students are familiar with game shows and social media, where they are used to sharing opinions and expressing themselves. Therefore, simulation of this in the online AL classroom may provide a solution to low participation rates. When combined with social constructivism, in which student interaction is key to learning, the tools on an online platform may assist educators in enhancing engagement and the acquisition of AL skills. In popular game shows, there is a powershift when the audience gains more control through participation, which improves the ratings of game shows (Enli & Ihlebæk, 2011). This tactic of audience participation can be applied to online learning with tools (such as Polls, Like, and Mic and Chat functions), especially in AL where student expression is so important. By applying these tactics, students may experience a sense of community which increases engagement and vital AL skills. Thus, this paper demonstrates how the simulation of game shows and social media can enhance student engagement and AL skills in an online classroom. To achieve this goal, student perceptions were analysed, following a convergent parallel mixed methods approach.

Keywords: Academic literacy, social media, game shows, sharing control, online teaching, empowerment, community, student engagement, social constructivism

1. Introduction and background to the study

Though online learning has been practised for several years, its application has been accelerated by our new "altered normal" (Moore, 2021). Since the onslaught of Covid-19, the educational environment has changed dramatically for both educators and students, specifically for contact universities. In South Africa, 12 out of 22 contact universities surveyed during 2020 had to change to online instruction (USAf, 2020), forcing institutions to "rethink the delivery of teaching to students" (Van Schalkwyk, 2021: 49). Navigating this online realm transpired quickly, resulting in a burgeoning of online-related difficulties, ranging from network connectivity issues to feelings of social disconnection (Hedding et al., 2020; Campbell, 2022). Unfortunately, under these circumstances, E-learning, which is supposed to improve the quality of learning through the use of multimedia technologies and the Internet (Commission of European Communities, 2001: 2), at times, becomes more obstructive than supportive. Potentially, this means that there is a missed opportunity with which to harness the online platform as an effective and engaging teaching domain.

Tamrat & Teferra, (2020: 30) and Walwyn (2020) concur that this could be the catalyst to effect long-term change in African higher education, making educational delivery more diversified. This is not merely a hopeful whim, as Veletsianos' (2020) research findings illustrate that online learning offers a variety of learning opportunities, as some students feel more connected to fellow students in the online environment than in face-to-face classes. Pinpointing engagement, the question now remains as to how to stimulate engagement in an unfamiliar academic online space. The answer could be found in "accommodating and valuing all the literacies that students have acquired in formal and informal contexts" (Carstens, 2012: 22). For this reason, altering the academic online environment into one that accommodates social media and game shows, and creating a more comfortable and familiar learning space could offer a solution for AL students.

This teaching strategy has the potential to create an entertaining solution to students' lack of experience with an academic platform, as well as gradually introduce them to more formal modes of learning. Similarly, the intervention naturally lends itself to a social constructivist approach to teaching in which online tools can become the means for student engagement. Students' familiarity with social media and game shows, in which they can become active participants with more control over the learning environment, may assist in building AL skills such as expression of opinion, argumentation, and critical thinking (Patterson & Weideman, 2013: 139-140). To be clear, by allowing students a comfortable space in which they are familiar enough to engage with tools available to them, as they would on a game show or social media, an opportunity is presented for them to gain a step upward on the scaffold to acquire AL skills.

The importance of academic literacy is emphasised by Van Rooy and Coetzee-Van Rooy (2015: 42) who found that "achievement in academic literacy support modules [is] the strongest

predictor of academic success in the first and second year at university". This then leads to success not only in the AL course but also in the transfer of these skills into other subjects and later on at the graduate level. Thus, through an analysis of student perceptions, this study aims to investigate whether applying audience participation tools, used by game shows and social media, may be used in an online classroom to improve engagement. Student perceptions will reveal if these tools assist with student engagement, community formation and development of AL skills. For this reason, the researchers chose to implement the pseudo social media classroom on an AL course for Humanities and Economic and Management Science (EMS) students on an access programme.

In assessing student perceptions of the intervention, the following sections will discuss student engagement and community in the online environment, social constructivism as an approach to balancing power in the online environment, and the ways in which social media and game show participation tools can be applied to the online AL classroom. The intervention and how it was implemented in the online classroom using audience participation tools as well as the methodology conducted in this study will also be explained. Most importantly, an analysis of the results and discussion thereof, and the study's limitations will follow.

2. Student engagement and community in the online environment

Though there are numerous variables which could positively impact online engagement in the classroom, this study's scope is limited to engagement as impacted upon by community, and power relations. Student engagement is an essential component in AL, as the skills which should be mastered, like reading, listening, writing, and speaking are developed when students are deeply engaged with their work, their peers and educators. A study conducted by Carini, Kuh and Klein (2006) found that engagement links positively to critical thinking and higher marks, but also that this is especially true for those who demonstrate the lowest ability. Similarly, "one of the primary components of effective online teaching is student engagement" (Dixson, 2010: 1). Therefore, student engagement, interaction and empowerment are crucial to successful learning. As such, online learning should aim to provide students with the same experience.

Unfortunately, the transition from contact to online learning during the pandemic resulted in the emergence of various engagement issues. Both students and educators alike found the removal of face-to-face learning quite challenging. Educators struggled to engage students without normal non-verbal cues like gestures and facial expressions at their disposal (Song, Kim & Luo, 2016). Instructors found themselves staring at a screen with names, instead of faces (Campbell, 2022). The lack of facial expressions from students can be an isolating experience for educators, as they cannot read students' expressions. This limits the gauging process. Muir, Douglas & Tremble, (2020) concur that isolation is a frequent problem in online learning. Similarly, many students feel disconnected from their instructors as well as peers

(Campbell, 2022). This isolates the student, who is already positioned within a solitary space. The virtual learning space can then in effect be quite impersonal, and the sense of community that contact classes so easily offer, lost. In turn, there is a breakup in communicative interaction creating a transactional gap between the educator and students (Seok, 2008). This transactional gap creates the need to facilitate engagement within an online environment.

Previous research has identified that building an online community seems to be at the heart of effective online student engagement (Rovai, Wighting & Liu, 2005; Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007; Chou & Chen, 2008; Dixson, 2010; Young & Bruce, 2011; Thomas, Herbert, & Teras, 2014; Gay & Betts, 2020; Leslie, 2020; & Muir, Douglas & Trimble, 2020). In other words, as Dixson (2010: 9) states: "Such connections really help students to feel engaged with the courses they are taking despite the lack of a physical presence of an instructor or other students". The online space should thus be tailored to create a sense of community (O'Brien & Toms, 2008). Shaping the online space into a community-forming realm counters the feeling of isolation that both educators and students experience, which could, in turn, enhance student engagement. When student engagement is enhanced, it results in increased motivation, satisfaction, and performance in students (Martin & Bolliger, 2018: 205).

Consequently, relationships among students, as well as between students and instructors, enhance learning, which is the very definition of a classroom community (Young & Bruce, 2011: 220). By creating a classroom community, a social presence fills the virtual classroom with "real" people (Dixson, 2010: 2). This approach answers the call of Osman (2020), who emphasises that education's way forward should be underpinned by collegiality and collaboration (in Walwyn, 2020).

A classroom community can be created through various interactive and collaborative activities. Gay & Betts (2020) recommend introducing collaborative activities both asynchronously and synchronously as this not only improves community and increased retention and learning but also enhances soft skills like problem-solving and teamwork. Though these activities could be seen as superficial engagement tricks, some research has found that they have resulted in deep learning. For instance, Felszeghy et el. (2019) demonstrate how highly complex subject matter, is presented in a gamification-based learning design. The results indicate that students responded positively to this kind of online strategy. The study carried out in the present article builds on the research findings above.

3. Balancing power through social constructivism in the online academic literacy class

Naturally, wherever, there is interaction amongst people, there will always be different relations to power. Cummins (2009: 263) emphasises this point by explaining that "[w]ithin collaborative relations of power, 'power' is not a fixed quantity but is generated through interaction with others". Since this power that is created within a group of people is fluid, how

it is yielded could have a significant impact on the effectiveness of a class. These power relations "are never neutral; in varying degrees, they either reinforce coercive relations of power or promote collaborative relations of power" (Cummins, 2009: 263). In the context of the aims for an effective teaching of AL, the latter is undoubtedly the preferred option. To avoid coercive power within the online classroom, this particular AL subject, which is on an access programme, follows a social constructivist approach for effective teaching and learning. This section, therefore, outlines social constructivism, which builds on Vygotsky's (1962) Social Development Theory.

Within this theory, social interaction is of vital importance in forming knowledge. As Watson (2001: 143) explains, "For it is mainly through the mediation of one or more other people that pupils make intellectual progress". Where most learning theories focus on the individual development of learning, social constructivism views the individual and society as inseparably interwoven (Cunliffe, 2008: 123-124). Van Wyk (2014: 210) emphasises that "students are socialized into academic discourse through their interaction with classmates, instructors and others in the academic context". This includes scaffolding work in a step-by-step manner, peer-learning, building on previous knowledge to form new knowledge, constant student interaction and student and lecturer feedback, allowing students autonomy to be responsible for knowledge building and sharing knowledge (Löfström & Nevgi, 2007; Gaytan, 2013). Linked to this, is scaffolding within each stage of the writing, and reading processes in a classroom. Scaffolding is a process where space is created for the learner to obtain knowledge with the use of extra support or "scaffolding". Scaffolding is gradually removed as the learner develops the ability to manage tasks (Bruner, 1983: 163; Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020: 240).

In addition, the social constructivist approach also creates a sense of community within the class environment. This approach promotes community by acknowledging "the impact of social and cultural influences on students, the ways their varied backgrounds and experiences shape students' learning, and the ways students understand and interpret concepts" (Schreiber and Valle, 2013: 397). Of utmost importance is that a deficit view of students' competencies should be rejected, and students' diversity should be respected (Van Wyk, 2014). Related to this sense of belonging and community in a learning context is the philosophy of *Ubuntu* inherent to the African society. Oviave (2016) broadly defines *Ubuntu* as:

> "a philosophy of being that locates identity and meaning-making within a collective approach as opposed to an individualistic one. As a result, the individual is not independent of the collective; rather, the relationship between a person and her/his community is reciprocal, interdependent and mutually beneficial".

This insight is elaborated on by Makalela (2018: 840) in which he describes bringing *Ubuntu* into the classroom as a learner-centred environment in which "co-learning between learners and teachers is valorised" and which in turn creates a "community-based learning approach, which provides accountability and quality assurance".

Finally, the social constructivist approach promotes social justice through learning-centredness. Carstens and Rambiritch's (2020) research on effective teaching practices for writing demonstrates their awareness of power relations involved in learning. Here, the student is allowed voice as an "activist" while the educator maintains the position of the "commentator". This allows a "safe space" in which students "have the ability to resist and contest the status quo and contribute to social change by using their freedom to draw on discourses and genres that are not privileged in the context, to mix resources and produce multimodal texts" (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020: 241-242). This also shows the importance of replicating the social constructivist approach in an online AL classroom. Through applying social constructivism and by using the tools available in an interactive manner, simulating game shows and social media, students are given a voice, thus promoting social justice in an unfamiliar environment. Therefore, because of its focus on community formation, student interaction, and social justice, social constructivism is an ideal approach for teaching AL in the online environment.

4. Game show and social media techniques and application to online teaching

The popularity of interactive broadcast shows has experienced exceptional growth worldwide (Enli & Ihlebæk, 2011: 954). The same is true of social media platforms (Gaytan, 2013). This trend is also visible throughout Africa (Sprinivasan & Lopes, 2020: 2986). A reason behind this growing trend could be explained by "mediated sociability", which focuses on how communication is exchanged between individuals within a space (Sprinivasan & Lopes, 2020: 2986). This is observable through the incorporation of the interactive component of the audience (Enli & Ihlebæk, 2011: 955). This monumental shift repositions the audience from being passive consumers to participants who actively influence game show narratives (Enli & Ihlebæk, 2011: 955).

The techniques used in games shows and social media could be applied to online classes, to improve student engagement. This aligns with teaching within African contexts which are focused on orality, sociality, and conviviality, and thus, could further assist student engagement (Nyamnjoh, 2017). Linking with this is the philosophy of *Ubuntu* and social constructivism mentioned in the previous section. Warner (2002) concurs that the more sociable the space, the higher the rate of participation by "the audience". For example, a common strategy employed to create such interactions is the Vote-ins feature. Providing the audience with the opportunity to vote for a favourite contestant, the viewer becomes more interested in the results of the show and so demonstrates increased engagement and loyalty (Enli & Ihlebæk, 2011: 955). This example can be applied to the online class with the use of Polls and similar features. Therefore, adapting the online classroom so that it includes pseudo social media/game show strategies could create a learning platform for students, which is enjoyable, interesting, and engaging.

Veletsiano, (2020: 17) emphasizes that successful teaching is engaging, effective, efficient, and socially just. Incorporating social media features and gameshow techniques may create classes which are engaging, effective and efficient. However, educators need to facilitate engagement and counter-power imbalance by relinquishing partial control. Syvertsen (2006) explains that there are three levels of influence given to the audience, which will ultimately reflect the level of control given to "the audience" or students in a teaching context.

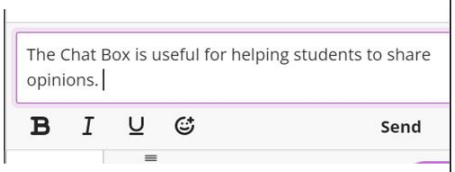
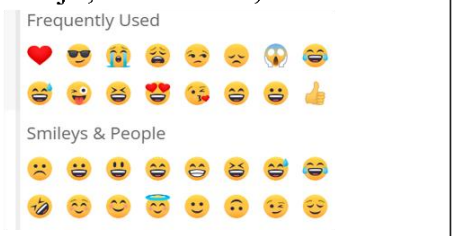
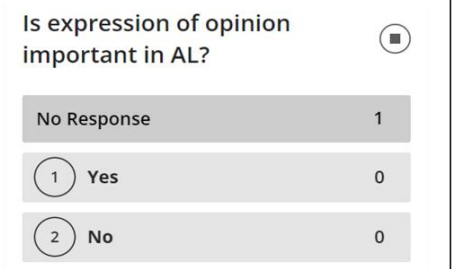
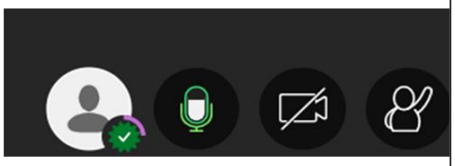
The first level of audience control is reactive, with a low degree of influence. At this level, the audience interacts through Polls, but they have no significant influence over the narrative. The second level is also reactive, with a slightly higher degree of influence. Here, the audience has some power, through voting and expressing themselves through tools such as Emojis and Like buttons, which will influence the narrative. Finally, the level of audience interaction at the highest degree of influence is where content is dependent on the participation of viewers. This last level of influence offers the most control for the audience, as participants' roles are completely altered; they become a more active part of the structure of the programme, instead of passive receivers.

This level of control allowed to the audience increases their participation and engagement with the show. Similarly, this mediated sociability, created by the educator will then positively alter student engagement. Students, who function similarly to an audience could then be drawn into engagement, through attaining some control over the online environment and shifting the power roles between educator and learner. Accordingly, in certain cases the audience "can shape new ways of being in mediated social worlds" (Sprinivasan & Lopes, 2020: 2987). By creating these learning opportunities, we are not only engaging students individually, but we are also creating a space that is empowering and conducive to AL skills development.

5. Implementation: the online pseudo social media class

Methods of encouraging audience participation on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram or game shows such as *The Voice* or *Who wants to be a millionaire?* can be utilized in an academic online space like Blackboard Collaborate. In an online classroom, engagement strategies for audience participation can include utilising features such as Poll functions, Commenting, Emoticons, Mic, and Video options. These are similar to actions such as Liking or Commenting on social media platforms or voting and "phoning a friend" on game shows. Through this entertaining application of tools at a lecturer's disposal, students gain more empowerment over an environment they might initially find daunting. Table 1 below illustrates Syvertsen's (2006) three levels of audience engagement, social media and game show aspects and examples which could be used in the pseudo social media classroom using Blackboard Collaborate.

Table 1: Syvertsen's levels of "audience engagement" and examples

Audience level of control	**Practical example**	**Icon/Examples in Blackboard Collaborate**
Level 1: Reactive – low degree of influence; audience interact through quizzes, Emojis, Like buttons and Polls, but they have no significant influence on the narrative.	Opinions, guided by the lecturer, are shared in the Chatbox. Polls are released, showing opinion and understanding. (*Who wants to be a millionaire*, *Conundrum*). Students are engaged, yet they have no control over the classroom. Emojis and Like buttons could also be used here, amongst other examples (similar to *Facebook* and other social media platforms).	**Chatbox**  Emojis, Like Buttons, etc. 
Level 2: Reactive – higher degree of influence; the audience has some power, through voting which will influence the narrative.	Polling could be used to ask students to decide, for instance, what topic would you like to discuss next. (*The Voice*). At this level students have some influence over the narrative and thus partial control over the class.	**Polling** 
Level 3: Interactive – highest degree of influence; this is where content is dependent on the participation of viewers.	Panels can be created – three students are selected and given work to prepare for the next class. They become a panel that will direct discussion firstly among themselves and then offer the debate to the rest of the class. (*The Talk, E-News*). Video, Mic and Chat functions can be used here.	**Mic and Video functions** *(hand raising and profile show as these also simulate discussion on social media and game shows)* 

The three levels of interaction as proposed by Syvertsen (2006) may be implemented in the online classroom in a variety of ways and according to lecturer discretion, but here follows a few examples. These examples also show how both social media tools (Emojis, Liking, Commenting, amongst others) and game show tools (Mic usage, and Polling for instance) are used in conjunction with each other for maximum engagement.

During the first level, an example would be for the educator to ask students to share opinions in the Chatbox. Polls are released eliciting opinion and understanding. Through emoticons or

the comments in the Chatbox, students gain the opportunity to express opinions and understanding. At this level, as shown by Syvertsen (2006), students are engaged, yet they still have very little control. An activity that works well at this level of interaction is *Conundrum*. In this activity (following the television show), students need to figure out the meaning of a jumbled word, and the first one to do so, is considered the winner. This type of activity, in which students utilize online tools like the Chatbox or Mic, often leads to proceeding levels of interaction, as well as acts as a hook or interesting starter point in the lesson to gain student attention. Interestingly, comment tools on online platforms, as noted by Kelm (2011) are invaluable in "providing insights and perspectives that would be difficult to obtain" in the usual face-to-face environment. The comment box gives students a chance to voice themselves simultaneously in written format, thus making it easy for them to go back to later, and for a larger audience to participate.

At level two, polling allows students to decide, for instance, what topic they would like to discuss next. Here, they have partial control over the narrative. Co-hosting is another activity which may be drawn on. In this case, one student is selected to co-host an activity, given sufficient time to prepare, and then finally presents this section of class, through Microphone and Video. The rest of the class is allowed to respond, and the co-host is given an opportunity to regulate feedback. Here, the educator does not relinquish complete control, but instead is there to co-host and assist the student if help is needed. This then replicates an actual game show where students have the chance to contribute to the "pseudo show", such as in *The Voice* or *Who wants to be a millionaire?*

Level three offers a variety of ways in which students are positioned to create their own learning opportunities. An example of this activity is a simulation of programmes like *The Talk.* For instance, three students may be selected and given work to prepare for the next class. They become a panel directing discussion firstly amongst themselves and then later the debate is opened to the rest of the class. This level of engagement especially promotes deep learning, as students are positioned to reflect on subject matter, and should even provide evidence to convince their peers. Most importantly, this can be applied to academic essay writing, in which students need to discuss topics which are relevant to the disciplines in which they are studying, in this case, EMS and Humanities. Finally, Polls may be used when students are preparing to write an essay, for example, which stance they would like to take up on a specific topic for discussion. This then can also either lead to more engagement in class discussions or break-out groups.

Applying these techniques to the AL online classroom should conceptually increase engagement, community, social justice, and AL skills. However, only after gaining students' perceptions on experiencing these strategies can it be presented as an effective online engagement strategy.

6. Research methodology

This study focuses on students' perceptions of improvement in engagement and AL skills as a result of implementing the pseudo social media classroom. The intervention was put into place and piloted in an online class using Blackboard Collaborate in an AL course at a South African university. The AL lecturer involved, had three classes at the time, in total consisting of 95 students. Each class consisted of about 32 students, making them ideal for strategies needed for incorporating a social constructivist approach to teaching and learning. The access programme, in which the course runs, has been in existence since 2016 in the form of a Higher Certificate. This certificate, once gained, provides Humanities and EMS students with access to their first year of university study. What is important to note about this specific cohort of students is that even though they are classified as English Second Language (ESL) learners, for many of them English may be a third or fourth language.

In the cohort analysed, on the Higher Certificate, namely on a satellite campus, students are pre-university, first-generation students on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) bursaries. The majority also originate from quintile 1-3 schools. Most are female and of the age of about 19 or 20 years old. To qualify for this access programme, students need to have obtained an Admission Point (AP) of between 18 and 24. AP scores may be low, not because students do not have the potential to succeed, but because the schools of origination may not have equipped them for university when it comes to the various literacies needed (Van Wyk, 2014: 207). Taking students' contexts into consideration (Boughey & McKenna, 2021) is important as it shows the level of AL support needed by students to succeed at universities where English is the language of instruction.

This study followed an interpretivist approach since it acknowledges the subjective meaning of social action (Bryman et al., 2014: 14). Ethical clearance and all institutional permissions required were gained for this study. Students provided their consent for the results of this study to be used for academic research purposes. Respondent anonymity ensured confidentiality. To gain insight into students' perceptions of the pseudo social media classroom concerning engagement and AL skills development, both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered. Gathering both qualitative and quantitative data ensures that the findings of a study are triangulated, thus increasing validity and reliability (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This also allows for a cross-checking of results and eliminating each method's weakness, while capitalising on both methods' strengths (Bryman et al., 2014: 62-63). A convergent parallel mixed methodology was selected to collect data in the form of a Questback survey, which contained both closed- and open-ended questions. The survey was administered near the end of the second semester of 2021. Completion of the questionnaire was optional. This survey method was specifically chosen to enhance convenience for respondents and to eliminate researcher variability (Bryman et al., 2014). This method was also chosen to gain students' perceptions and feedback on the intervention in a short space of time, especially considering

the sudden need, during Covid-19, to improve online student engagement for AL skills improvement.

The survey consisted of 24 questions assessing students' perceptions of the engagement tools used on Blackboard Collaborate (such as Emojis, Polls, Mic, and Comment boxes), as well as their perceived improvement in AL skills. The questionnaire comprised mostly dichotomous questions (yes/no) and opinion-related questions, as well as Likert scale questions. This combination of the first question types was used to promote opinion-building and expression as students would need to take a stance on each theme. Additionally, the Likert scale can be used to transform the participants' subjectivity into an objective reality (Marais, Nel & Fourie 2019: 81). Qualitative data in the form of students' comments and reflections in open-ended questions, were used to support quantitative data. The online survey was adapted to simulate the social media/game show environment. For example, to gather quantitative data, some Likert scale questions used Emojis to make it fun for students to participate. This is similar to the use of dichotomous questioning which simulates the use of polling. The survey is shown below in Table 2.

Table 2: Survey testing student perceptions of improved engagement and AL skills

Survey Question	Answer Type
1. How did you feel when you first had to join an online classroom?	
2. As a result of engaging with social media / game shows (such as Polls, Voting, Chatboxes, Emoji's, etc.), do you feel that your experience was much better than you thought it would be? (In other words, are you happy using Blackboard Collaborate because of these?)	
3. Did using tools similar to social media / game shows (such as Polls, Voting, Chatboxes, Emoji's, etc.) help you to feel more comfortable in the Academic Literacy classroom?	Yes / no
4. Did using tools similar to social media / game shows (such as Polls, Voting, Chatboxes, Emoji's, etc.) help you to feel more confident in the Academic Literacy classroom?	Yes / No
5. Do you feel comfortable on Blackboard Collaborate because you are used to using tools similar to social media / game shows (such as Polls, Voting, Chatboxes, Emoji's, etc.)?	Yes / No
6. Of the tools which are similar to social media / game shows, which are your favourite?	List of tools
7. Did using these tools help you feel it was easier to express yourself (such as give an opinion or explain an idea)?	Yes / No
8. Did using these tools help you to feel that your critical thinking skills improved?	Yes / No
9. In what ways do you think these tools helped you improve your critical thinking skills? If you like, please explain or leave this box open.	Open-ended
10. Did using these tools help you to feel that you had more control in the classroom?	Yes / No
11. Did having control in the classroom make you feel that you could interact easily with your facilitator and classmates?	Yes / No
12. Please explain if you like (or leave this blank)	Open-ended
13. When your facilitator used polls in the classroom, did this help you think of an opinion on the topic being discussed?	Yes / No
14. When your facilitator used polls in the classroom, did this help you to think of reasons to support your opinion?	Yes / No
15. Did you find it easy to use and express yourself in the Chatbox function?	Yes / No
16. Do you think the chat function improved your argumentation skills?	Yes / No
17. Do you think the chat function improved your way of thinking critically?	Yes / No
18. How often did you use the mic once you were used to the other tools?	Likert Scale
19. Do you think using the mic improved your ability to express yourself in public?	Yes / No
20. Do you think using these tools helped you eventually improve your reading and writing skills (through interaction in the class)?	Yes / No
21. Do you think these tools helped your success in the [AL] course?	Yes / No
22. Do you think these tools help you in succeeding in your other studies (due to increased control, confidence, etc)?	Yes / No
23. Do you think these tools help you in succeeding in your other studies (due to increased control, confidence, etc)?	Yes / No
24. Please add any other comments about this topic (if you have nothing to add just leave this blank).	Open-ended

Click to enlarge (Appendix A)

The study followed a cross-sectional research design for collecting data at a single point in time. It employed a non-probability convenience sampling technique, which was based on the researchers' accessibility to the sample (Bryman et al., 2014: 178). Of the 95 students who had access to the survey, 38 completed the survey, allowing for a reliable sample size to analyse. The results of the survey then displayed how students perceived having classes using student engagement strategies which followed pseudo social media and game show tactics. The survey revealed interesting perceptions from students, which could assist in developing future online engagement strategies.

7. Results and discussion

The survey assessing students' perceptions of the pseudo social media classroom provided mostly positive results, with regards to improving student engagement and AL skills. Firstly, the survey compared how students felt initially about online learning in general to when social media and game show tactics had been used in the classroom. Initially (as seen in Figure 1), the students were sceptical and unsure about online learning, with only 40% feeling confident that learning would take place in the online classroom. However, once the strategy had been used in the classroom, the results differ considerably. They show that 71% of the students were "very satisfied" and 24% were "satisfied". This means that most of the participants (almost 95%) felt their experience was enhanced as a result of the strategies used. Figure 1 below shows these results as well as how student interest in online learning increased by 56%.

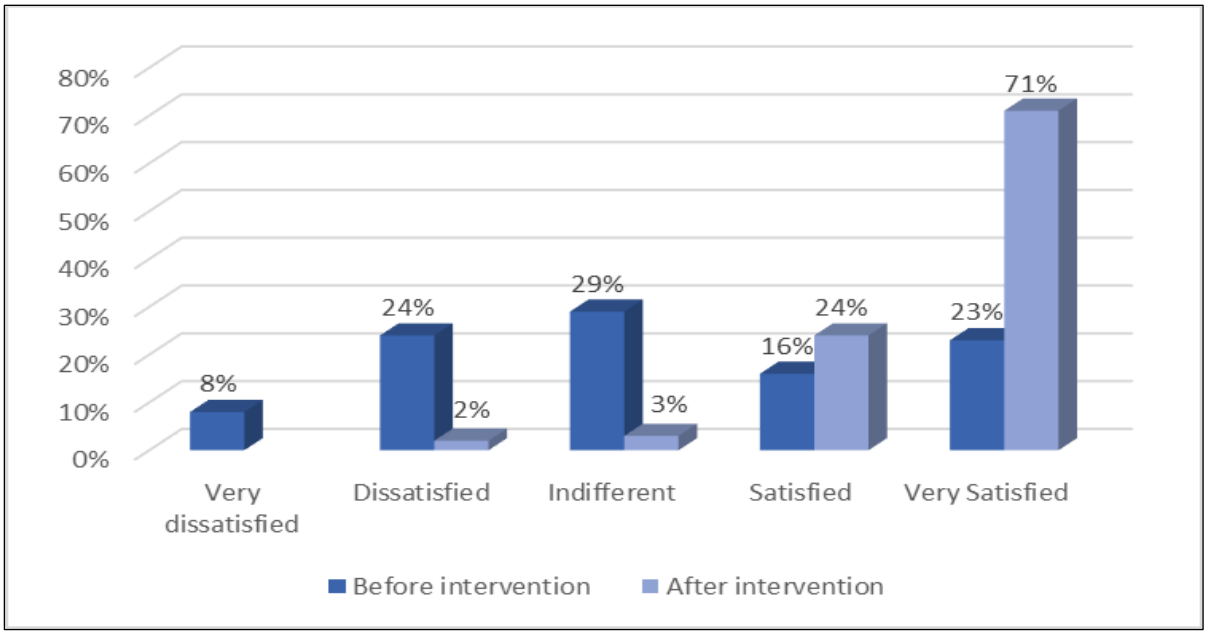


Figure 1: Students' perceptions of the online environment before and after the intervention

That students may have felt more satisfied in the online classroom after the intervention speaks volumes. This shows how students may perceive community formation or *Ubuntu* because of this enhanced social constructivist approach in the online class. This may assist in eliminating

feelings of isolation that students and instructors often experience in the online space. (O'Brien & Toms, 2008; Gaytan, 2013; Makalela, 2018; Muir, Douglas & Tremble, 2020)

Figure 2 shows how students felt that they had more control, comfort, confidence, and ease of expression in the online classroom because of using tools on Blackboard Collaborate which are similar to social media and game shows. In addition to this, it demonstrates how they felt their critical thinking skills had improved, as well as interaction with peers and facilitators. As can be seen from this figure, most students felt positive about the teaching tools, and agreed they were beneficial to their studies. It must be pointed out that this also suggests that students feel a sense of community, through building comfort, confidence, and interaction within the classroom.

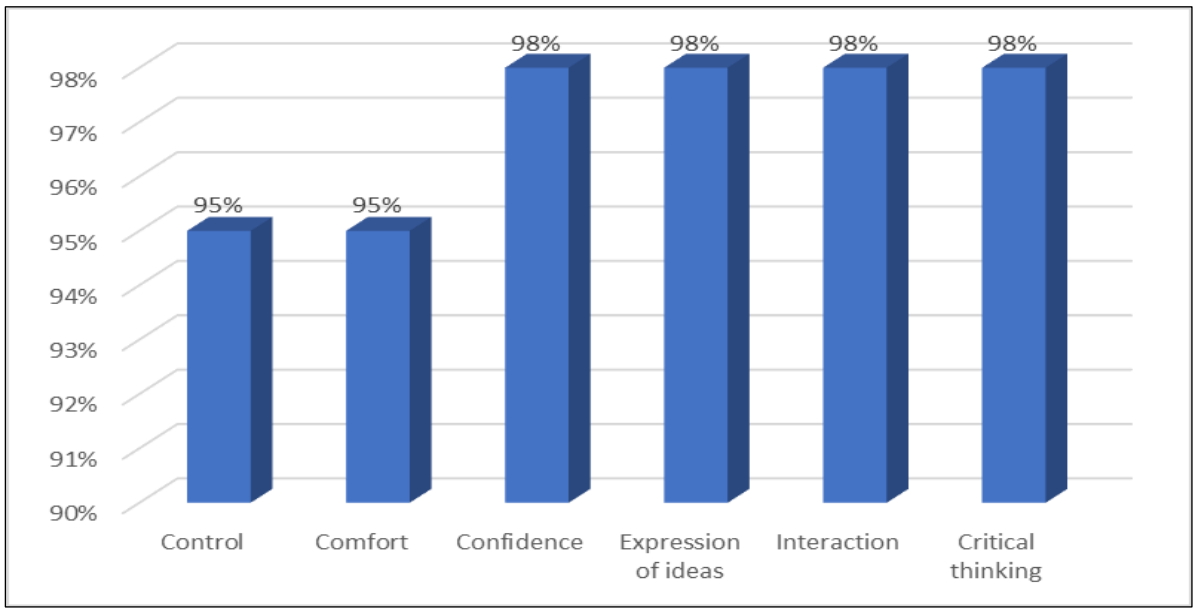


Figure 2: Student perception of the benefits of "audience control" as a result of social media and game show simulation

Consequently, students' perceptions of these tools reveal that they assist with student success within AL. Furthermore, that students feel that they can express ideas in a "safe space" means that they have the potential for future academic success, not only in AL but also in other subjects and beyond graduation (Carini, Kuh and Klein, 2006; Young & Bruce, 2011; Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020). Qualitative data provides further verification. For example, one of the responses specifically addressed the impact this strategy had on creating a socially just space: "It makes me feel free and never be scared to interact with people and not to be afraid to ask questions." This demonstrates that by altering the classroom to a more comfortable and interesting space, students may experience more pathways to learning that are engaging, effective, efficient, and socially just.

Further research into tools which simulate game shows and social media, specifically the "vote-in function" which can be obtained through Polls on Blackboard Collaborate, showed an almost

unanimously positive response, not only statistically, but also in student comments. For instance, one student's comment, similar to others, shows how using polls helped them express opinion: "I always express my opinion through polls." This is seen below in Figure 3, which captures the result of investigating whether students felt that Polls could help them not only formulate an opinion (seen by expressing opinion) but also that this function helped them to start thinking of reasons to support their opinions (as seen by "reasoning skills"). This is important for writing development because students need to be able to support their views and formulate arguments based on evidence (Patterson & Weideman, 2013: 139). The "vote-in function" then becomes a valuable tool in assisting students to do this in a fun, unobtrusive way.

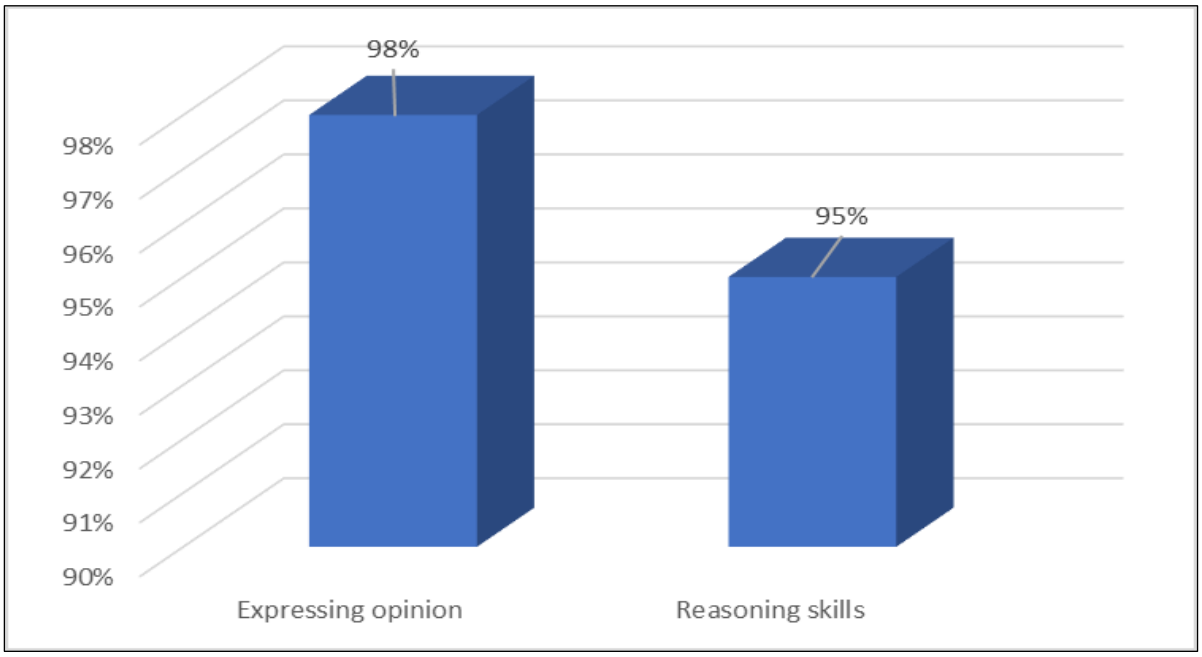


Figure 3: The perceived benefits of Polls for student expression and reasoning

Similarly, probably the most popular tool amongst students, the Chatbox, likely because they are so familiar with commenting on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, showed the same response. Questions about whether students felt they could express themselves fully, improve their argumentation skills and whether their critical thinking skills improved as a result, were also met with almost total agreement, as seen in Figure 4 below. Again, this illustrates how students experience engagement in the classroom, just by using tools with which they have familiarity. This may alleviate feelings of isolation and help students to feel a sense of community or even *Ubuntu* – something especially important in South African society (Makalela, 2018). The Chatbox is especially effective as students might feel more comfortable expressing themselves even if they would usually feel cautious about doing so in a face-to-face environment. This could then lead to more confidence when students' views are respected by their classmates when voicing and expressing themselves with the Microphone function. This is in line with Carsten's and Rambiritch's (2020: 241-244) mention of the student becoming the "activist" with "respect for identity, personal experience and diversity".

Furthermore, students' comments in writing format provide rich material for further student interaction, feedback, collaboration, and learning (Kelm, 2011).

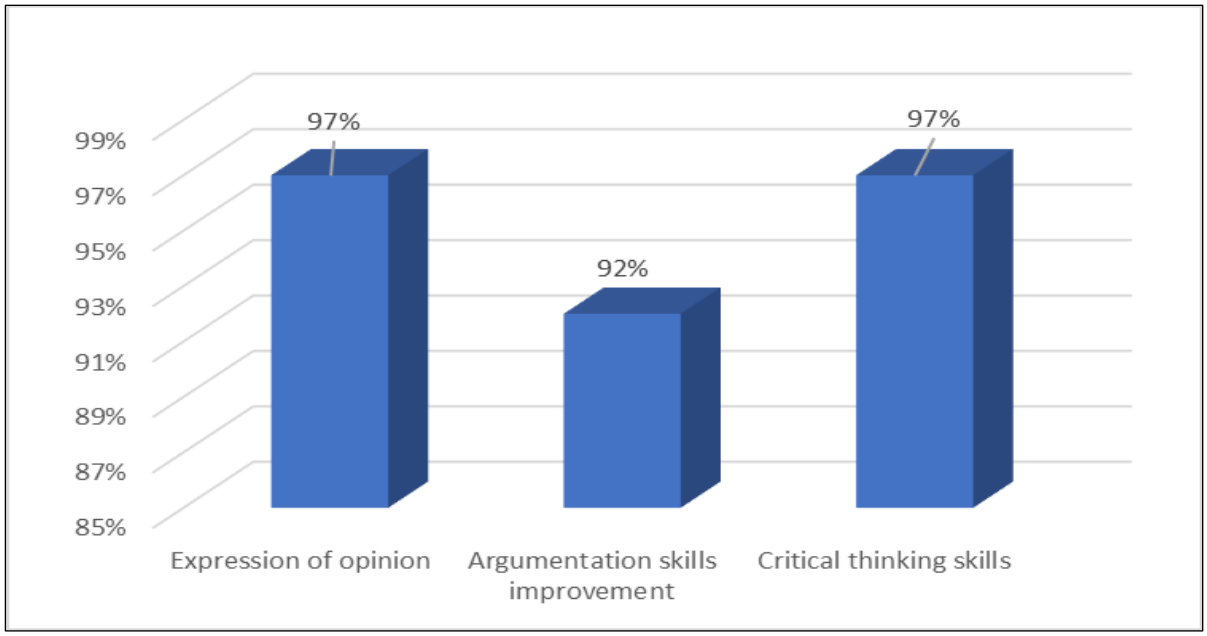


Figure 4: Students' perceptions of the use of the Chatbox function

Below in Figure 5, it is also possible to see which social media and game show tools students enjoyed interacting with the most. Interestingly, the Chatbox and Polls are the favourites. With these two tools, other opportunities such as using the Mic and Video, which students are often wary of, can be incorporated. Students may feel that they gain more confidence using their favourite tools – those they are more familiar with – before they attempt to use their own voice.

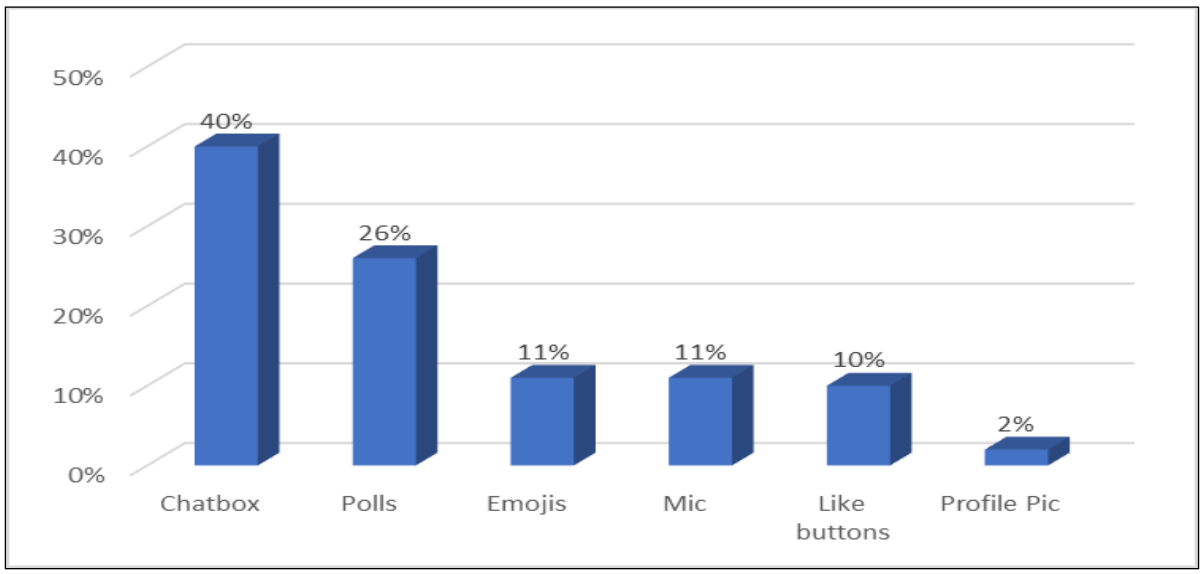


Figure 5: Students' perceptions of favourite game show / social media tools

Finally, and most importantly, it was investigated whether students, as a result of using social media and game show tactics in the classroom overall, actually felt their AL skills improved. This is specifically with regards to the improvement of reading and writing skills, success in the actual AL course and whether this helped them achieve in other subjects.

The latter is important for students in this cohort, as they do not always realise they need to take what they learn in AL and apply it to writing in other subjects. Skills transferal goes far in assisting not only with other courses but also with future academic success, therefore, concurring with Van Rooy and Coetzee-Van Rooy's (2015) findings. The results show overwhelming positivity from students as seen below in Figure 6. One student's comment relating to skills transfer indicates further evidence of how this was experienced: "I would like to explain about this help me to improve my academic literacy skills. Now I'm improving more in all my modules."

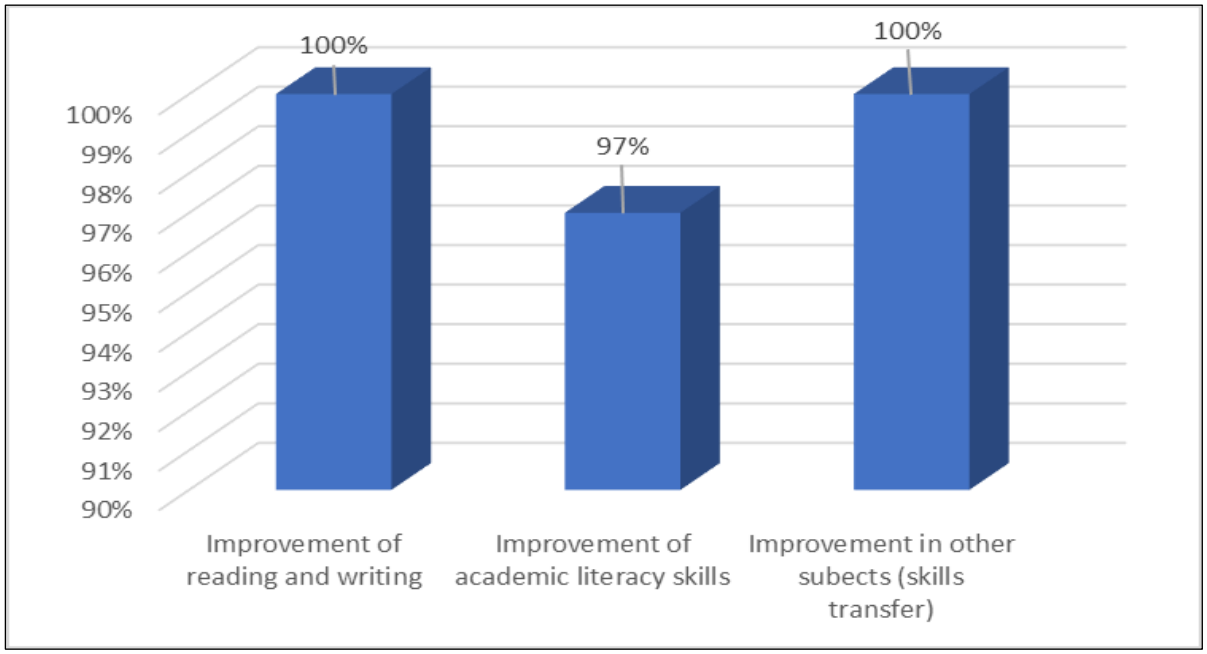


Figure 6: Student perception of success in the AL subject, reading and writing and other university subjects (skills transfer)

Overall, the students' perceptions of the intervention are favourable. They seemed to perceive a sense of community through interaction with their peers and with their lecturer as a result of simulating these tools. As a result, this could lead to the building of valuable skills such as confidence and comfort in an academic environment. The benefits of this are numerous. Not only did students perceive an improvement in their AL skills, but also a more balanced shift in power dynamics, creating a socially just atmosphere. Students who feel safe operating in this manner are likely to take this into other environments, thus achieving empowerment (Cummins, 2009). Qualitative data in the form of student comments and reflections attest to this, validating quantitative findings as well.

Further qualitative data in the form of the students' comments point to them being able: "to think fast", "improve responses", "engage myself in group discussion" and "improve more in my studies". Quite a few comments also point to improved interaction, quick facilitator feedback on anything not understood, improvement in AL and other modules and "enjoying" the approach, to the extent of "I would be happy if we can do it more often". Therefore, qualitative data corroborated the results received by quantitative data.

8. Limitations and future recommendations

This study was limited by time constraints, as it was only conducted during the middle of the second semester. Consequently, the participants' response time was restricted, and so slightly unfavourable for elaborate answers. In addition, the time constraints also influenced the decision to only conduct the study in three classes, thus restricting the scope of the study. If research were to be replicated in the future to increase participant responses, the timing of the survey would need to be considered more carefully. In addition, interesting qualitative data for future research could be gathered through interviews, focus groups or observations. Since this was a preliminary, pilot study, to gain data on student perceptions, these methods did not form part of the study. The results, however, proved valuable in determining that the lecturer's approach could be helpful to the online AL classroom.

Future research could replicate this study and conduct it across more classes on this particular access programme, thereby verifying if this is a sustainable approach. Although this study took place in an online environment, the approach could be replicated in face-to-face classes too. It would be interesting to compare the results of purely online, blended and face-to-face classes.

9. Conclusion

This study focused on students' perceptions of pseudo social media and game show classes as an intervention to improve online student engagement. Through students' perceptions, the study shows how an online environment based on social constructivism, which allows students to have more control, especially over the tools at their disposal, may enhance engagement and success in an AL classroom. These online tools included using Blackboard Collaborate functions, such as Chatbox and Mic and Video functions, Emojis, and Like buttons, to simulate social media and game shows. Furthermore, of importance was the investigation of whether this approach to student engagement could assist students not only with feeling more empowered in the classroom environment but also with the building AL skills vital for university success.

The analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, shows positive results, thus underlining the potential of this teaching strategy. There are various benefits to this approach which follows social constructivist principles. Students' perceptions reveal that sharing control through the use of pseudo social media tools, improved confidence, levels of comfort, as well as interaction

with peers and lecturer. Most importantly, students perceived there to be an improvement in their AL skills such as reading and writing, argumentation, expression, critical thinking, and skills transfer. Therefore, the pseudo social media classroom succeeded in creating a more conducive learning environment for teaching academic literacy.

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Appendix A

Table 2 [enlarged]**:** Survey testing student perceptions of improved engagement and AL skills

Survey Question	Answer Type
1. How did you feel when you first had to join an online classroom?	
2. As a result of engaging with social media / game shows (such as Polls, Voting, Chatboxes, Emoji's, etc.), do you feel that your experience was much better than you thought it would be? (In other words, are you happy using Blackboard Collaborate because of these?)	
3. Did using tools similar to social media / game shows (such as Polls, Voting, Chatboxes, Emoji's, etc.) help you to feel more comfortable in the Academic Literacy classroom?	Yes / no
4. Did using tools similar to social media / game shows (such as Polls, Voting, Chatboxes, Emoji's, etc.) help you to feel more confident in the Academic Literacy classroom?	Yes / No
5. Do you feel comfortable on Blackboard Collaborate because you are used to using tools similar to social media / game shows (such as Polls, Voting, Chatboxes, Emoji's, etc.)?	Yes / No
6. Of the tools which are similar to social media / game shows, which are your favourite?	List of tools
7. Did using these tools help you feel it was easier to express yourself (such as give an opinion or explain an idea)?	Yes / No
8. Did using these tools help you to feel that your critical thinking skills improved?	Yes / No
9. In what ways do you think these tools helped you improve your critical thinking skills? If you like, please explain or leave this box open.	Open-ended
10. Did using these tools help you to feel that you had more control in the classroom?	Yes / No
11. Did having control in the classroom make you feel that you could interact easily with your facilitator and classmates?	Yes / No
12. Please explain if you like (or leave this blank)	Open-ended
13. When your facilitator used polls in the classroom, did this help you think of an opinion on the topic being discussed?	Yes / No
14. When your facilitator used polls in the classroom, did this help you to think of reasons to support your opinion?	Yes / No
15. Did you find it easy to use and express yourself in the Chatbox function?	Yes / No
16. Do you think the chat function improved your argumentation skills?	Yes / No
17. Do you think the chat function improved your way of thinking critically?	Yes / No
18. How often did you use the mic once you were used to the other tools?	Likert Scale
19. Do you think using the mic improved your ability to express yourself in public?	Yes / No
20. Do you think using these tools helped you eventually improve your reading and writing skills (through interaction in the class)?	Yes / No
21. Do you think these tools helped your success in the [AL] course?	Yes / No
22. Do you think these tools help you in succeeding in your other studies (due to increased control, confidence, etc)?	Yes / No
23. Do you think these tools help you in succeeding in your other studies (due to increased control, confidence, etc)?	Yes / No
24. Please add any other comments about this topic (if you have nothing to add just leave this blank).	Open-ended

Return to Table 2 in text.