

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Messiness of Meaning Making: Examining the Affordances of the Digital Space as a Mentoring and Tutoring Space for the Acquisition of Academic Literacy

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Abstract

Having incorporated a digital aspect to our academic literacy course, and having monitored this over the last three years, we have come to believe that online mentoring can serve as an essential form of tutoring and mentoring. Our study is located in the field of New Literacy Studies and examines the affordances of a digital space in a first year academic literacy course in the Humanities. We focus on students' acquisition of academic literacy, as well as critical thinking and reflexivity around a core social science concept; identity. Here, we refer to the ability to think critically and reflexively, as the 'analytical mode', a key driver in shaping the pedagogy of the course. In this paper, we explore the online participation of two students and how they engage with the theme of identity, not only as an academic concept but also as one intrinsically linked with how they see themselves in a diverse post-apartheid South African context. We argue that the digital space promotes a particular form of the 'analytical mode' as students grapple with texts and concepts on the academic literacy course. Using a qualitative case study methodology, our analysis of students' online interaction revealed that the digital space allowed students to express themselves with a level of depth and sophistication, and to share dissident views that could not be expressed in the traditional classroom space. Furthermore, we argue that the digital space can suspend students' urgency to agree or disagree with the arguments of authors they read. By holding students between the two positions of agreement and disagreement, we propose that the digital space becomes a space of reflexive¹ discomfort which captures various moments in students' drafting processes as they operate within the analytical mode. Therefore, we argue that the digital space, if harnessed with a particular type of mentoring philosophy and pedagogy that activates the analytical mode, can free up the traditional forms of academic mentoring and tutoring within the academy. This allows students the freedom to live with the messiness of their texts and to grapple with their conceptual understanding, and in doing so, develop their 'authorial self' (Clark & Ivanič, 1997).

¹ See D'Cruz's (2007) analysis of the dynamic and innovative ways in which the concept of reflexivity is used.

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Keywords

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Introduction

Currently it is unusual for an article on digital spaces to be included in a collection intended to make a contribution to tutoring and mentoring. However, we would like to argue that the online space can be harnessed as a mentoring or tutoring space, or what Guittierez (2008) terms as a ‘third space’. Therefore, it has the potential to contribute richly and in novel ways to the tutoring and mentoring aspect of higher educational pedagogies. In this paper we offer some evidence of this potential.

This study is situated in post-apartheid South Africa where, despite positive changes in the education system, the remnants of the notorious Bantu Education system can still be felt, especially in the rural areas.² As such, the dispensation of education remains quite divided, and only a small proportion of ‘historically disadvantaged’ students make it to university.³ Our tertiary institution has thus designed a series of cross-faculty interventions to give students social and epistemic access to the ways of knowing that will facilitate their integration into academia. Such interventions are offered under the banner of transformation and social redress and are subsidised by government funding in an attempt to achieve the state’s broader transformation goals.

In this paper, we analyse one such intervention which we all teach on: an academic literacy introductory course (henceforth referred to as ‘AcLit’) for first year Humanities students on a four-year (extended degree) programme.⁴ We use a blended approach – face-to-face and online interaction – as part of our pedagogy to teach academic writing to small groups of students. The students who take the course are often those who come from historically ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds and have scored low on the academic literacy component of the National Benchmark Tests (NBTs).⁵ These students are seen as having

² See the 2005 report by HSRC; and also Holborn’s (2013) article.

³ The UNESCO (2010) measure of gross enrolment rate reflects that the overall percentage of South African students who are participating in higher education in the country is about 16%, of which 60% are White and only 12% are African and Coloured. It is estimated that less than 5% of Black South African students are able to gain access to the higher education sector. See also the CHE (2013) report, and Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007) for more insight into how racially skewed student participation rates are in South African higher education.

⁴ ‘In the Faculty of Humanities, the Four Year Degree takes the form of a Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Bachelor of Social Science (BSocSc) degree taken over four years (as opposed to three years). Students on the Four Year Degree have access to augmented courses, foundation courses and workshops, mentorship and extended periods of registration’ (<http://www.humanities.uct.ac.za/hum/apply/undergraduate/edu>).

⁵ ‘The National Benchmark Tests’ (NBTs) were commissioned by Universities South Africa with the task of assessing academic readiness of first year university students as a supplement to secondary school reports on learning achieved in content-specific courses. The NBTs assess the ability to combine aspects of prior learning in competency areas – Academic Literacy (AL), Quantitative Literacy (QL) and Mathematics (MAT) – that directly impact on success of first year university students. AL and QL are combined in the AQL test and written in a three-hour morning session; the MAT is written in a three-hour afternoon session. Both are administered under standardised testing conditions at sites across South Africa on designated ‘national test dates.’ For more information see <http://www.nbt.ac.za/>

the potential to succeed in the academy if provided with the appropriate curriculum interventions. It is, however, important to point out that the concept of 'disadvantaged' in the context of this intervention is shifting, and that the students entering the programme come from very diverse socio-economic and schooling backgrounds.

The main aim of our AcLit course is to teach students ways of reading, writing and argumentation in the Humanities context, using the themes of language, identity, culture, gender and race to ground the academic discussions. These themes are still very topical in the post-apartheid higher education context, given the fact that the memory and experience of racial prejudice and discrimination during apartheid continues to act as a stimulus for articulating ideas and expressions around identity and transformation. The recent *Decolonising the Curriculum* and *Rhodes Must Fall* student protest movements are testimony to the types of changes that students are demanding with respect to legitimising their presence on South African higher education campuses.⁶

Within the above context, the classroom can thus be seen as a space of discomfort, not only because it broaches on current issues, but because it situates itself during the transitional phase between the high school context and university, a phase that Ivanič (1998) would refer to as a 'critical event'. The latter refers to the significant encounters that individuals experience during crucial periods of change in their lives.⁷ Students therefore not only learn about topical themes but learn to interrogate them. Students' experiences during this critical event are coupled with the need to operate within what we have come to call 'the analytical mode' on the AcLit course. We see the analytical mode as a pedagogical imperative that attempts to encourage students to critically engage with academic texts and concepts while holding off on taking a definitive position in an academic debate and in their initial essay drafts. One of the aims of this pedagogical imperative – the analytical mode – is to disrupt and challenge students' preconceived and commonplace notions of race, gender and culture, and get them out of their comfort zones to interrogate what they may have taken for granted. This is important, since much of the teaching practices that occur in our public schooling system is geared towards the delivery and memorisation of knowledge, and not the questioning and interrogation thereof.

The past two years in particular have brought to the fore the need to open up further spaces for students to express themselves, given the extent of student protests on campuses alluded to above. At the same time, our approach as staff on the AcLits course is that these spaces should also enable students to exercise individual thought so that they will be in a position to interrogate, and not simply be swayed by the majority view or binary thinking.

We have attempted to foster this type of learning environment by developing and embedding a digital literacies component into the AcLits course. This comprises an online website where students have the opportunity to both rehearse their engagement with texts

⁶ See Kamanzi's (2015) article for useful background information on this.

⁷ Ivanič's understanding of the term 'critical event' is derived from the concept of 'critical experience' which is drawn from a more psycho-social analysis of lifespan identity theory. Critical events and experiences therefore concern 'moments of flux ... between ... [individual's sense of their] different selves' (Ivanič, 1998, p.16).

and concepts introduced in the course, and to reflect on these critically. It also provides new opportunities for online mentoring and tutoring pedagogic engagements and exchanges. In this paper, we explore the extent to which this AcLits online space promotes our pedagogical imperative – the analytical mode – to nurture a particular voice in writing, notably the ‘authorial self’ (Clark & Ivanič, 1997), through such online mentoring and tutoring engagements. The ‘authorial self’ refers to a sense of the writer’s presence in their text and the ownership of ideas in their writing. This voice is discussed shortly in more detail.

Digital Spaces and Literacies

The digital space and its plethora of literacies have come under the spotlight in recent literacy research. Studies focusing on harnessing the digital space in the academy have examined its affordances for the acquisition of academic literacies (see Goodfellow & Lea, 2013). Of particular interest to us is how the digital space can be utilised to promote the analytical mode and in doing so, shape the acquisition of academic literacies and the development of an ‘authorial self’ (Clark & Ivanič, 1997).

In this paper, the digital space has been construed as an alternative site of learning, or in the words of Gutiérrez (2008, p. 152), as a ‘third space’ where the ‘formal and informal intersect’, promoting new forms of knowing and being in the academy, and transforming the limited views of teaching as delivery. Her description of the ‘third space’ fits aptly in our understanding of the digital space, when she states that this space creates ‘the potential for authentic interaction, a shift in the social organisation of learning and what counts as knowledge’. Her view echoes our view of the digital space as a nurturing space for authentic learning. Through its multimodal design, the aim is to activate the different modes in which students learn and bridge the divide between the realm of ideas and that of lived experiences through tangible examples. Gutiérrez’s (2008) understanding of ‘third spaces’ would resemble Canagarajah’s (1997) ‘safe house’, where dissenting voices can be heard. This said, we do not adopt a technicist approach towards the digital space, nor do we view it as the panacea for the acquisition of academic literacies. Online mentoring in this regard becomes an invaluable tool for helping students to grapple with the application of theory to their own lives, so as to allow them to move beyond the abstractions that so often undermine meaningful learning.

The understanding of digital literacy pursued in this paper is aligned to that proposed by proponents of the New Literacy Studies movement, where digital literacies are viewed as a set of social practices promoted on the online learning sites. McKenna and Hughes (in Goodfellow & Lea, 2013) make this evident when they state, ‘Throughout, we are informed by an academic literacies paradigm, a theoretical framework which views writing as a social practice (Lea & Street, 1998).’ They use the academic literacies approach as it surfaces the tensions between power, context and identity within digital spaces. Therefore digital spaces and their literacies are not neutral forms of writing, as Street (1984) would point out, but are as ideological as any other space and the literacies it promotes.

When designed to promote academic reading and writing in the social sciences, the digital space operates in quite a distinct way, making those very modes visible for the

educator and learners, and in some ways altering the genre in which ideas get expressed. Presently, students are immersed in different social networking sites and blogging course sites, where they can share their views and comments without feeling the need to be grammatically correct or articulate. Leveraging the openness of such spaces as rehearsal spaces, the AcLits course site was designed on the Wordpress (blogging) site. According to McKenna and Hughes, 'Social networking spaces (e.g. Twitter, Wordpress, Flickr) are giving rise to alternative ways of articulating and responding to academic knowledge' (in Goodfellow & Lea, 2013, p. 22). They comment further that this new genre of writing leads to texts that are open and intertextual, with a heightened awareness of audience (McKenna and Hughes, in Goodfellow & Lea, 2013). In our case, this audience, mostly comprised of peers, is not passive, as they can engage with one another's thoughts in a collaborative spirit. These begin to redefine what we understand as 'academic writing'. For Lea and Stierer (2009), the everyday writing texts do not simply reflect academic practices but are 'central to them'.

As a result of our engagements with literature and our observations of our students' engagements, we are interested in how the digital space and its writing modalities can activate in-depth engagement with texts and concepts introduced on the course. In other words, we are interested in how the digital space can enhance engagement in the analytical mode.⁸ These intersecting engagements have also forced us to reflect more critically on our own roles as instructors and facilitators of learning within the digital space, and the extent to which such roles are able to complement practices within the traditional teaching space, so that the analytical mode can be upheld.

The Analytical Mode

We understand the analytical mode as a particular disposition which encourages students to suspend judgment and remain in a productive discursive space. For us, the analytical mode represents an integrated form of engagement with course materials and academic literacy, which highlights the complexity and messiness of scholarship, which we accept as a normal part of the writing process (and is the reason why we focus on the process rather than the product of learning in our course – as will be explained shortly).

The analytical mode can also be understood as a space of discomfort for students (Zembylas & Boler, 2002), as lecturers are encouraged to create moments of tension during the course where students are asked to confront and engage with questions that relate to their notions of identity – the core theme of the course. This is particularly important in a country like South Africa, where notions such as 'the rainbow nation' have come under fire for not adequately addressing real issues of transformation,⁹ thus leaving the country and its citizens to grapple with the challenge of forging a new identity after the demise of apartheid.

⁸ We are grateful to John Trimbur from Emerson for coining this concept in discussion with us.

⁹ See Naylor's article (2009); see also Habib's (1996), and Sichone's (2008).

Bearing the above context in mind, we attempted to create opportunities for students to engage critically and reflexively with issues of identity as a social construct¹⁰ so as to develop students' authorial identity in their academic writing. In the past, lecturers on our course would create space in their face-to-face interactions with their students to assist them with producing short pieces of written texts on the topic of identity. These short pieces of writing would be a form of 'inkshedding' (see Hunt, 2005), which is a social practice that involves writing down one's initial ideas on a particular topic (prior to a general class discussion on that topic) and then immediately passing them on to someone else to read, with the aim of getting feedback on the content of the writing only (i.e. the writing is not evaluated in any way). This type of writing is meant to be low stakes (students do not have to adhere to the conventions of academic writing), and developmental, and would ultimately form the building blocks for a final essay that centres on identity. During these inkshedding sessions, students were expected to draw on their life histories as a means to make sense of the notion that identity is a social construct. However, these inkshedding exercises that are by and large facilitated by lecturers and which have characterised the face-to-face interactions of the classroom, have now given way to online writing exercises in the AcLits course. Our online mentoring roles in this respect involve a level of feedback that is not judgemental or evaluative, but which responds simply to what is being stated.

In the disciplines, generally the discursive and authorial selves are valued over and above students' brought along resources and capital. However, on the AcLits course, the online writing tasks draw on students' autobiographies as a legitimate way of inserting themselves in the process of engaging with theoretical concepts. Within this process-driven approach to academic writing (see Maybin, 1996), the autobiographical self and the discursive self are recruited to develop an authorial identity in academic texts. The way in which these different selves are harnessed in writing can index how students engage in the analytical mode. Part of our online mentoring roles is geared towards facilitating these to and fro movements between the various selves, encountered by students.

The online language module of the AcLits course as a tutoring and mentoring space

Through the writing exercises, the digital space captures the moments when students shuttle between different selves and make visible the hidden components of the analytical mode. Further, we discuss how the digital space operates and showcases the analytical mode when learning is scaffolded through authentic tasks.

The online language module course site is an online writing-intensive, collaborative space for the last teaching day of a four-day AcLit teaching week; it takes the place of a conventional tutorial session. It also departs from the tutorial space in that the content is activated through various modes for an enriched learning experience, and students' views are captured in writing, available for peer viewing and comments. This is where students' understanding of texts and concepts that they were introduced to during the first three days

¹⁰ For insight into identity as a social construction, see Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999); and Shotter (1993).

of the week (that is, in the traditional classroom setting), are consolidated through reflective and application tasks that are completed online in the computer lab, in the presence of ourselves. During these sessions, we play more of the role of mentors and facilitators who prompt and respond to discussion and engagement, both in the physical lab space and online, rather than in the role of lecturers who provide knowledge content and assess the students' work.

Similar to tutorials, built into the online module are design principles such as alignment to course content, flexibility and responsiveness to students' emerging needs. As such, the online sessions are developed week by week, based on our assessment of students' orientation to texts and concepts in the face-to-face classroom. In other words, as part of our roles as mentors and facilitators in the online space, we are both responders and designers in this pedagogic endeavour.

The weekly online tasks enable students to grasp the application of theoretical ideas introduced on the course with vivid examples and case studies. The course site serves as a rehearsal space where students experiment with different writerly voices. Thus, the tasks are not formally assessed, but build toward major assignments on the course.

Students have the option of completing the online tasks at a later stage, up until Sunday of that week, and lecturers often notice high frequency of students on the site over the weekend. This is perhaps a sign that students are keeping up with the content in the course covered during the week. As online mentors, we also respond to students' online tasks collectively rather than individually, summarising core issues and providing prompts and questions that allow students to take their discussions and interrogation of texts further. These online responses are built into the following week's face-to-face formal teaching, where we shift from our roles as online mentors and facilitators and assume our roles as lecturers, and use students' online understanding of concepts as entry points for our formal teaching. And, in fact, this type of online facilitation has meant that we as online mentors also had to master the 'analytical mode' ourselves. Of course it is significant here that the successful transition from the online space into the formal face-to-face teaching space is undertaken by the same people, viz, AcLits staff, who signify an important element of continuity to the type of blended learning that occurs.

This online course site served a pedagogical function of encouraging students' expression and sharing of their views and responses to course readings and online content. Being an informal writing space of expression, it made allowance for the messiness of meaning making in process. Thus, it encouraged the development of the authorial identity by encouraging students to interact in an analytical mode.

Methodology

The online site also yielded data for research in the form of informal meaning making and pauses and dilemmas in this development. To analyse students' engagement with texts and concepts on the online course site, a qualitative case study methodology was employed.

The case study methodology enables researchers to acquire in-depth and detailed insights into particular phenomena. In case study methodology, it is also crucial to

delineate what the case is. The case is defined by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 25) as ‘a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context’. The case is, ‘in effect, your unit of analysis’. In this study, the case was students’ critical engagement with the concept of identity in the digital space. The case study adopted here was an exploratory one (Yin, 2003), as we did not enter the research with clear presuppositions about the outcomes of the study. We allowed the data that emanates from students’ online engagement to speak for itself. At the same time, our theoretical positioning, as mentioned earlier, was very much informed by our socio-cultural approach to literacy as proposed by scholars in the New Literacy Studies field.

We were thus able to track the written work of our 120 students across different course sites (the on-line space and traditional teaching space). We obtained permissions from the students to use their online entries and submitted assignments as data for our research purposes. Our purpose here was directed at assessing a particular outcome: the main course essay, so as to gauge whether, and in what capacity, the online space impacted students’ conceptual development and understanding of the concept of identity. In other words, how did the essays reflect that students were operating within an analytical mode? Through the analytical mode, how did students develop a particular authorial identity?

Heuristic: The clover model of writer identities

To analyse students’ critical engagement with texts and concepts in the digital space, we pay close attention firstly to the way they enact voice in writing. This may offer insights as to how the online tasks could promote an analytical mode of engagement.

Voice in writing is a nebulous concept; for analytical purposes, we will refer to it in terms of the representation of writer identities through means such as tone, opinion and style. In his manual on writing, Fulwiler (2002), like Ivanič and Camps (2001), explains that ultimately in our written communications, the style, content and arrangement of our writing combine to represent us. He explains that the writer’s voice is something that develops almost unconsciously, and largely apart from more conscious techniques that are focused on in learning to write:

In writing, we can’t, of course, hear the timbre of the voice or see the expressions on the face. Instead, we hear the voice through our reading, perhaps gleaning our first clues about the writer from the particular combination of words, punctuation, sentences, and paragraphs that we call *style*.
(Fulwiler, 2002, p. 199)

Clark and Ivanič (1998) analyse voice using the clover model of writer identity, which is subdivided into the autobiographical, discursual and authorial selves. The notions of ‘autobiographical self’ and ‘discursual self’ allow for a clearer sense of locating and separating our research participants’ constructions of their life-histories from the ‘values, beliefs and power relations’ that inform the discourses out of which those life-histories emerge.

The autobiographical self is that part of an individual's identity which is presented in a text to reveal the individual's sense of origin, their 'life-history'. The autobiographical self is a dynamic self, always in the process of being constructed so as to reflect the changing life-history of the individual. As such, the individual's sense of being is comprised of a dynamic interplay between events that occur and the manner in which the individual experiences and represents these events. Ivanič (1998) relates the autobiographical self to Goffman's notion of 'writer-as-performer'. It is the latter that constructs the text and 'produces a self-portrait.'

The 'discoursal self' is the 'impression' of oneself that the writer wishes to convey to the reader, and contains aspects of the socially constructed 'values, beliefs and power relations' of the context in which the text is embedded. Ivanič (1998) argues that this impression of self can be 'multiple' and even 'contradictory'. She relates the discoursal self to Goffman's identification of the 'writer-as-character', which Goffman argues is 'the identity which the writer-as-performer portrays'. Of prime concern here is how the writer uses her 'voice' in order to sound or come across to the reader in a particular way. Paxton (2006, p. 86) explains Bakhtin's (1986) analysis of how writers create a voice for themselves through 'assimilating, reworking and reaccentuating' other voices.

Finally, the authorial self is defined as the extent to which writers 'express their own ideas and beliefs in their writing' and 'their presence in the text'. The 'authorial self' would hence be reflected in the type of content the author chooses to present and the manner in which she aligns herself with that content in a way that marks her presence or absence.

Drawing on Giddens' (1991) notion of the 'reflexive project of the self'; that which is sustained through the constant revision of 'biographical narratives', Ivanič (1998) shows how the authorial voice is constantly being reworked as individuals reflexively make sense of their identities with new developments in their lives.

Alongside Ivanič, Hyland (2002) also offers interesting insights into the complexities surrounding the development of an authorial identity in student writing. Hyland's (2002) work with English second language speakers shows that students were fluent in strategies of 'author invisibility'. Our contention in the AcLits course is that some students (many of whom are English second language speakers) doing extended degrees may also have been indoctrinated along similar lines. A post from the blog, *theearchivist* (2012), commenting on Hyland's views on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses (in his article, 'Authority and invisibility: Authorial identity in academic writing'), states:

It seems that by adhering to the formulae of genres and 'accepted' discourse we are encouraging students to produce simulacra of academic writing. A replica with no soul. What worries me is that in doing so the power is retained within the echelons of western academia. If writers "gain credibility by projecting an identity invested with individual authority" (p. 1091) and individual authority is consistently dissuaded then we do not afford students the credibility they deserve.

In this paper, the clover model of writer identity is appropriated to analyse the shifts in writing made by students in the digital space and how these may signal particular ways of engaging with the analytical mode.

What follows by way of illustration are extracts through the chronology of the course, from two case studies in our data analysis, describing and reflecting on how the students, ‘Thembi’ and ‘Sandra’, engaged with texts and concepts on the course.

Data Analysis

Week 1: Orientation experience extract

In the first week of lectures, we gave students an online exercise which required them to write a reflective piece on their experiences on transitioning from school to university.

In the comments box provided below, write a reflective piece sharing your experiences at UCT so far, based on the reading on Transitions in your course reader and the video.

In Thembi’s response she provides a partially constructed narrative of her identity. She notes that her transition from school to university brought with it ‘anxiety’, ‘fear for failure’, ‘lack of confidence to participate’ and a shyness to engage with people who did not speak isiXhosa. Here she sees language, specifically English, as a barrier for her when it comes to engaging with her peers and lecturers. This is captured in the following words: ‘I am developing hatred for English because it seems to be a barrier to my comfort zone so that I can be able to perform to the maximum of my ability when chances are available.’ Although she views English as a barrier to her learning she is able to articulate quite clearly, ‘I have a potential inside me’ and ‘I know that I also have an answer’. For Thembi, however, the performative nature of speaking in class does not always reflect the potential that she believes she has, because when speaking there is ‘no chance to edit’. Here, the online environment is seen as a safer space than the traditional tutorial because students have a chance to think through their responses. Very often, the traditional tutorial interactions require immediate verbal responses, which in turn require immediate evaluation by both tutor and student.

Sandra, on the other hand, has mixed feelings, excitement, anxiety, and a number of questions about whether she will succeed and make her family proud, ‘Will I succeed? What if I become very mediocre? Will I fail my family?’ Like Thembi and many other first year students trying to adjust to the new university environment, Sandra initially feels overwhelmed, but soon this sentiment morphs into excitement, particularly when ‘meeting new people and encountering diversity in its rawest form’. We can infer from her statement that she comes from a homogeneous schooling background. This diversity for her is an eye-opening experience. She then reflects on her goals and where she would like to see herself academically and as a person: ‘I look forward to keep on carrying on in this journey [...] to see how I grow academically, how I grow as a person, and to finally find my feet and know who I am and where I want to be in this world and how I can contribute in making this university, country and world into a better place!’

As we can see, Sandra's sense of personhood is tied with her ability to make or drive social changes. Her phrase, 'how I grow as a person' suggests that she sees identity as fluid and constantly evolving. The online task enables Sandra to project herself into the future and set goals to contribute nationally but also globally. At this point, we do not know much about Sandra's socio-academic background and how that informs her perceptions of self, her context and her aspirations.

Week 2: Reflection on English

In Week 2, students were given the online exercises below. That week they had been introduced to Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) and George Makubalo's (2007) writings.¹¹ The questions required them to apply their understanding of these two readings to authentic cases and their own experiences.

1. In light of the above statements [from Ngugi's (1986) chapter], how would you interpret his statement that the English language and literature 'takes us further and further from our selves to other selves, from our world to other worlds'? (Write a paragraph in the comment box provided below.)
2. Makubalo (2007) argues that English is a 'commodity in great demand' (p. 21 of course reader). However, from the two graphs, it is evident that English is not the most spoken language both globally and locally. In your opinion, what then accounts for its dominance? Secondly, how would Makubalo respond to Ngugi's statement that the English language is taking one away from one's ethno linguistic identity? Provide a response to the two questions in the comment box below.
3. Activity: In Makubalo's article, we are introduced to four learners: Thabo, Teboho, Anna and Sello. They each position themselves differently in terms of their language practices. Which one of these learners do you closely associate with and why? What would Makubalo's response be to the way you construct YOUR identity? Please write a paragraph in the comment box provided below. You can also comment on your peers' comments.

Thembi's response to the questions is interesting as it differs from her construction of her identity as disadvantaged in Week 1's exercise. In this exercise Thembi foregrounds, asserts and celebrates her Xhosa identity with the statement, 'I am Xhosa and proud to be'. Although the metaphor of English as an enabler endures in her response when she states, 'it will help me in things that it will help me in', it is tempered with a protective discourse of her 'Xhosa identity' in the words, 'if a person values his culture he should not allow the advantages of English to colonize his mind'. Here Thembi views English, like Ngugi does, as possessing the ability to colonise the second-language speaker's mind but also as a vehicle for success in contexts where English is dominant and a marker of success. Judging

¹¹ Ngugi's (1986) chapter 'The language of African literature' presents an ethnolinguistic view of identity as something that is fixed and determined by the community in which one is born, in his case, the Gikuyu community in Kenya. He argues that the dominance of English takes him away from his Gikuyu language, sense of self and community. On the other hand, Makubalo (2007), a poststructuralist South African researcher, argues that identities are socially constructed, fluid, multiple and contradictory. His article presents four individual stories of black South African learners and their stated attitudes and language practices.

from her assertion of her Xhosa identity, coupled with her recognition of the dominance of English in a post-apartheid South Africa, it comes as no surprise that she identifies with Sello, a learner in Makubalo's paper, who values code-switching between languages.

Thembi also shows an awareness of the contradictions of supporting Ngugi's critical views on English in a university where English offers certain affordances – something that she is acutely aware of. In an attempt to resolve these contradictions, she states that 'we are different people of different cultures, and surely there is a need for us to communicate with each other, and here is English enabling us but we abuse it'. She uses the word 'abuse' to speak about the use of English (it is likely she meant 'overuse') as if she acts on the English language, but she goes on to refer to how English destroys local languages. Although her response does present the reader with some binaries, namely that of the isiXhosa speaker versus English speakers, we start seeing a move towards a more complex and nuanced understanding of identity.

In Sandra's response, she views the English language not only as a dominant language, but also as a product of the West. She links everything that is westernised with what is modernised, and sees English as a language that gives one access to status and prestige, which she refers to as a place of 'high value'. Her choice of words implies that the use of language, in this case English, is linked to one's self-worth, or that ascribed by others in society. She elaborates by explaining that English has such currency and power because it is a universal language. In that way, she suggests that while English may have emerged from the West, it has been appropriated by the rest.

She goes on to make a comparison between Makubalo and Ngugi's views on the English language, and explains that while the former believes that languages can be appropriated, the latter sees English 'taking away from African-ness'. Her use of 'African-ness' suggests firstly that she has taken the liberty to coin a new word to capture the essence of what it is to be African, and by the same token, the inverted commas suggest that she is challenging the assumption that there is a single way of being African, or at least that she is wrestling with the idea. At this point though, she does not openly state her own position.

It is only in the next task that she uses her personal history to explain why English does not destroy one's 'African-ness' and that it is 'up to us to decide whether or not it will'. In this instance, we see a strong assertion of agency when she writes her own personal reflection with respect to the English language, using English, and despite English. Like Thembi, she describes herself as an 'isiXhosa girl'. She views a Xhosa identity as not being restricted to an ability to speak isiXhosa, but also encompassing a way of life. Then, she begins to share the contradictions, 'born in Transkei but grew up in the suburbs speaking English'. She claims that she cannot speak isiXhosa; however, she notes that fluency in the language is not an essential marker of being an 'isiXhosa girl'. In this way, she can reconcile the fact that she self-identifies as an isiXhosa girl who speaks English. She does admit that she speaks isiXhosa to her mother.

She goes on to share the socio-economic situation in the household, 'living with my mother who was a domestic worker and my white guardians', but is quick to add that, 'from an early age I knew that I belonged to a different culture than the 'white people'.

Like Thembi, she is positioning herself strongly with those who are Xhosa, even though she comes from a household where she benefits from her guardians' financial support and speaks both languages. This is Sandra's way of challenging the traditional markers of language and class to define her Xhosa identity.

In the next paragraph, while she starts off saying that English has not influenced her identity, she goes on to contradict herself by acknowledging that, 'maybe English has shaped only minor things in my identity'. At this point, we find her hedging with the use of adverbs such as 'maybe', and vague terms such as 'things' which she does not qualify. Nonetheless, she still sees culture as something that one is 'born into' versus 'born with', to suggest that culture is a product of the earliest phases of socialisation. However, this view is also contradicted when she states that her Xhosa culture is 'embedded in my DNA'. She ends off on a philosophic note with 'English has given me a step up in the world, but my isiXhosa roots have given me a step up in this life'. Once again, she makes the distinction between the upward social mobility enabled through knowledge of English, and the inner growth enabled through her Xhosa identity. Like Thembi, she presents these influences as being distinct and mutually exclusive.

When asked which of Makubalo's research participants she would most relate to, she chooses Anna purely because both share the same 'origin and background'. Like Anna, we find that Sandra is romanticising her 'Xhosa' roots but goes on to state that, unlike Anna, she does not experience the same 'sense of loss' when speaking English. Even as she recalls her schooling, she firmly asserts that the other languages, 'including English', moulded her sense of self. What is significant here is that at the end of her reflection, when she sees herself through Makubalo's theoretical lens, she begins to see 'one big contradiction of culture and identity'.

Week 3: Reflective component

In Week 3, we designed an exercise to track shifts in conceptual understanding of identity as shown below. Students were expected to engage with the concept of identity reflexively, by writing in the online space about their autobiographical self in relation to new ways of understanding identity, as influenced by course readings and classroom discussions.

Task: Reflect on your notion of language and identity. Write a paragraph using the following phrases:

1. Before I came to UCT, I used to think of identity as ...
2. Then I read Ngugi who defines identity as ...
3. I also read Makubalo who argues that identity is ...
4. Now, I think of identity as ... because ... OR
I still think of identity as ... because ...
5. I have the following questions which I would like to ask Ngugi and/or Makubalo and the class ...

(Note: your paragraph should be in continuous prose without the numbers 1-5.)

The Week 3 task can be seen as a pivotal moment, when students get to revisit their views on identity in light of Ngugi and Makubalo's ideas around language and identity. Here they are asked to look back on their understanding of identity *before* they came to study at the institution, and revisit their views on identity in light of Ngugi and Makubalo's ideas around language and identity. The task offers students the option to resist, challenge or acknowledge and agree with the authors' positions. This becomes a critical moment for AcLit lecturers to track how students' views on identity, often essentialist ones like in the case of Thembi and Sandra, have been transformed based on their understandings of theorists who hold post-structuralist views on identity.

In Thembi's response, we see that although she still agrees with Ngugi, she starts to understand identity as constructed and fluid. This is a view held by Makubalo who draws on post-structuralism to theorise identity and its construction. Her words, 'I still think of identity as the way you do things' (referring to 'Xhosa culture'), coupled with 'I can not say that identity is fixed', reflect an understanding of identity as constructed out of past experiences that can endure across contexts, *and* identity construction as a continual process. Therefore there is a recognition that identity is also influenced by social contexts, because she states that 'as time goes on my surroundings change of which I can not be able to socialize with them if I don't want to adapt to change'. By juxtaposing the two authors, we see that she agrees with aspects of Ngugi and Makubalo's arguments. For us, her response reflects a complex and nuanced understanding of identity and also signals a shift in her conceptual understanding of identity when compared to her responses in Week 1.

Sandra's response to this exercise shows similar shifts in her understanding of identity. In her response she notes that before she came to the academy she defined her identity along racial lines and identified herself as 'Black'. This comes as no surprise as the racial categories of the apartheid era, which drew on essentialist notions, still have currency in contemporary South Africa. While one would expect Sandra to align herself with Ngugi, based on her responses in Week 1 and 2, she actually introduces the notion of choice. She states, 'Now I think of identity as your characteristics and how you define yourself as a person, things like race, culture and language help form your identity but I think it all boils down to your beliefs, dreams and who you want to be in life. I don't believe you are defined by your ethnicity but by who you define to be.' She still sees ethnicity as playing a significant part in her self-definition, but she emphasises that she decides how these characteristics will be used to define her. In a sense then, she begins to understand that individuals have agency in the way their identities are constructed and therefore we might find that she will even reconsider her previous statement that culture is an inescapable part of her DNA.

So, while our roles as online mentors and facilitators in the computer lab seek to guide and promote students agency in terms of developing their critical and analytical thinking and writing skills, our roles as lecturers is to discern the extent to which students' understanding and conceptualising of the identity construction theory, taught in the face-to-face space, is developing and being employed in their online writing. It is in this sense that the continued interaction between our online mentoring roles and our lecturer roles contributes towards creating a holistic learning context.

Week 4 Essay

In Week 4, students submitted an essay in response to the following essay question:

Ngugi (1986) argues that the dominance of English takes us “further and further from our selves to other selves, from our world to other worlds”. Drawing on the readings, argue for or against this statement.

Here is Thembi’s introduction to the essay,

I am a young girl who can write infinite scriptures if I can be asked about how my identity has been built, because there are many bricks that I and my surroundings have utilized to construct it. In addition to that, as I am still growing I cannot position myself in a fixed spot or environment because I am continuously reconstructing it. For me the fact that we are different means that we have to live in different ways in order to be united or socialise with others. This is to say that I strongly disagree with Ngugi’s argument that English alters our ethnic identity into other identities and relocates us from our region to other regions, as we cannot have unwavering identity. Beliefs and actions will continue influence our creation of identity as long we live also our surroundings will always influence our actions. Bear in mind that language is one of the bricks used in identity construction because language is the carrier of culture and culture also forms up your identity.

In Thembi’s introduction to the essay we see a significant shift in how she views identity conceptually and how she views herself as compared to her initial responses in the extracts discussed above. In Week 2, for example, she not only expressed a loyalty to her ‘Xhosa-ness’ when she stated, ‘I am Xhosa and proud to be’, she also made it clear that English can colonize the minds of those who do not have English as a home language. However, in her introduction above she states, ‘I am a young girl who can write infinite scriptures if I can be asked about how my identity has been built, because there are many bricks that I and my surroundings have utilized to construct it.’ This sentence is significant as it suggests that she has shifted from an essentialist notion of identity to one where identity is understood as fluid and continuously under construction. We also see this conceptual shift when she writes, ‘I am still growing I cannot position myself in a fixed spot or environment because I am continuously reconstructing it [referring to her identity].’

Unlike in previous exercises where she agreed with Ngugi’s views, we now see that she states, ‘I strongly disagree with Ngugi’s argument.’ For us, this emphatic statement in her introduction, signals a clear shift from an essentialist, towards a post-structuralist view on identity. Her introduction also shows that she now understands that social contexts and others have a direct impact on identity construction when she writes, ‘as long we live also our surroundings will always influence our actions’. In her essay, it is apparent that she now views identity as multifaceted and that speaking a second language such as English is not the main marker of her identity or any person’s identity. However, she does articulate the idea that she has an ‘original’ identity or core identity which underscores the identities forged when she moves from one context to the next. Furthermore, she constructs her identity as someone who is ‘striving to discover’ herself, which suggests a fluidity in her conceptual understanding of her identity. Again, this is a marked shift from her conceptual

understanding of identity in Week 1 of the course (before they had read the Ngugi and Makubalo texts). It is our contention that the freedom of expression created by the online space, coupled with online mentoring prompts and feedback, has made such conceptual shifts much more visible and has not only added to the students' understanding of their own experiences, but also our understanding as mentors and lecturers of our students.

In Sandra's essay, she puts forward an understanding of identity similar to that of Thembi. She reinforces the point that she constructs and re-constructs her identity, hence steering away from the essentialist notions she expressed in the first two weeks. She states, 'I adapt in different environments as Makubalo (2007) would say, I construct and reconstruct my identity.' In this way, she perceives herself as the author of her personal narrative, rather than a passive filter through which the environment encodes meaning onto her.

Like Thembi, who made mention of an original identity, Sandra adds a new element in her understanding of identity, namely that of a 'core identity'. She explains, 'I believe that as I grow I add on to my core identity. My world experiences change how I think and see things.' This 'core identity' perhaps refers to the values and beliefs she mentions in the Week 3 task. It seems to be a bedrock onto which she adds new layers of self-definition and self-expression. One of those layers is her use of English, as she mentions, 'Learning other languages and cultures is part of that long endless journey of identity. English is the key to all of this.' As such, she begins to see identity construction as a fluid and evolving process, rather than a product. Surprisingly, she now finds English to be 'key' to her self-definition, a statement which is in stark contrast with her previous views that she is a 'Xhosa girl' and that English does not define her but only gives her 'a step up in the world'. To support her argument, she refers to Makubalo who 'argues that there is no such thing as a fixed identity'.

Her strategic foregrounding of Makubalo over Ngugi again signals a shift in her position and her alignment with a constructionist view of identity. In addition, she begins to distance herself from the view that language is the only aspect defining identity. This contrasts with her previous work, where she not only saw language as a determinant of identity, but also conflated language, identity and racial belonging. At this point, we see her disentangling the different aspects of identity construction in order to take more agency in appropriating the aspects that are congruent with her personal narrative.

Affordances of the online language module as a mentoring or tutoring space

As mentioned, we understand the analytical mode to be a mode of thinking where students can grapple critically with texts and concepts in a low-stakes collaborative safe space. This collaboration between online student engagement, online mentoring and face-to-face teaching serves as an important vehicle for making sense of what and how students learn. It is an example of good innovative teaching and learning practice, as echoed by Sheridan (1992, p. 90) who defines this type of collaboration as 'an overarching framework... a conceptual umbrella' that acknowledges alternative ways for the realisation of educational goals. As we analysed Thembi and Sandra's responses, it is evident that through the reflective tasks, the online space is activating different modalities of thought and being.

Expressing the inexpressible: 'I know that I have an answer'

In traditional face-to-face teaching environments such as tutorials, there is limited time and scope to hear each and every student's views on the theme under discussion. Students remain silent for various reasons, including their perception of a lack of fluency in English. Thembi, for instance, in Week 1, views English as a 'disabler', a barrier to communication, seeing herself as being more fluent in isiXhosa. Yet she admits that, 'I have potential inside me', and 'I know that I also have an answer'.

Due to the self's uneasy location in an unfamiliar academic setting, many ideas remain hidden in the deep recesses of one's intellectual black box (Pinker, 1995, p. 137), unless articulated through words. This poses a problem if we seek to identify shifts in the 'authorial self' (Clark & Ivanič, 1998) in the classroom setting. Assuming that voice is a measure of one's critical thinking, and that it becomes manifest through speech or writing, how does one tap into the thoughts evoked in the silent moments? Can critical thinking be present in the moments of silence? The first time we hear Thembi's views about the disjuncture between her perceived competence and her performance in the classroom, is in the online space where we take on the roles of mentors and tutors, and where she is asked to share her orientation experience. This is when she steps back or steps out of the confines of the formal lecturer-led classroom to reflect critically on where she situates herself as she navigates through the institutional spaces. The online space hence takes the shape of a confessional where students can silently share ideas for which they will not be held accountable.

In the same vein, the online space is seen to open up possibilities for the articulation of deep-seated emotions and autobiographical aspects of one's identity, rare to find in a physical tutorial. Students can share feelings of anxiety, fear of failure, lack of confidence, which are common to both Thembi and Sandra as they encounter the overwhelming aspects of the university environment. The fact that 'everyday talk' is permissible on online spaces such as this one, allows for a more personal engagement with the academic theories and concepts, which in turn allows students to reflect on what the knowledge means to them, how it relates to, or jars with their lived reality. Our roles as mentors and tutors allow for a different type of interaction with students, and it is through these roles that we enable students to articulate their thoughts in a more relaxed mode of writing. It is not surprising that Lea and Stierer (2009) therefore see 'everyday talk' as encouraged by social networking sites, as central to academic activities.

In Sandra's case, she also uses the online task to project herself in the future, and share her aspirations of making a contribution locally and globally. The online space allows students to look back, but also transcend the frontiers of time to project themselves forward. These autobiographical strands are seldom acknowledged in academia, for they get misread as bias. Even in academic essays, students' authorial self often takes precedence over their lived experiences. However, through these online tutoring exercises, students on the course are able to use themselves as case studies and track their shifting sense of self over time to make powerful arguments about the fluidity of the very subject matter under examination.

Here, we note a strong overlap between students' autobiographical selves and their authorial selves (Clark & Ivanič, 1998), where the autobiographical elements get recruited to assert a strong authorial presence.

Sharing dissident views

While students are able to try out new subjectivities, we note that over time it provides them with a subject position to articulate their stance towards the texts and concepts introduced in class. As such, they begin to operate at a metacognitive level, sharing their comfort or discomfort vis-a-vis the knowledge being shared, and how it may challenge their preconceived views on identity and other themes covered on the course (Zembylas & Boler, 2002). For instance, Thembi and Sandra feel the urge to express their deep-rooted 'core' Xhosa identity, even as they encounter new ways of defining their emerging identity and acknowledging its fluidity.

By the same token, they also express their views about the language through which knowledge gets exchanged in the academic space, namely English. Both Thembi and Sandra start off by stating that English can be an enabler but can also 'colonise minds', that it is a Western product, but also one that enables upward mobility. Thembi warns against 'abusing' English, in other words, overusing it in ways that begin to erode one's self-definition. On the other hand, Sandra is able to reconcile the contradictions of being a 'Xhosa girl', while speaking English, by extending the definition of Xhosa-ness beyond its linguistic attributes. Even so, both seem to romanticise a Xhosa culture that they are 'born with' or is in their DNA. At that point, it is noteworthy that lecturers on the course do not intervene on the site to weed out the contradictions, but allow them to be juxtaposed in students' messy attempts at meaning making.

Even in Week 3, when students are asked to present their previous understandings of identity and their current one, they are offered two routes into the exercise: 'Now I think of identity as...', which would signal a shift in their conceptual understanding of identity, and 'I still think of identity as...', which would allow them to resist the influence of readings that often offer a constructionist view of identity. In that way, the online task demonstrates that the course is not trying to brainwash students into shedding their essentialist notions of identity, but rather to interrogate them in light of new perspectives. At that point, the lecturers turn into facilitators or mentors, prodding students with questions, rather than formally teaching content. These strategies of questioning versus overt didactic strategies of imparting knowledge verily form part of the pedagogy of discomfort, which the course privileges in order to enable students on the extended degree programme to embark on their own trajectories of meaning making. In this, it moves away from the discourse of 'difference as deficit' to that of 'difference as a resource' (Canagarajah, 1997), to acknowledge students' brought-along experiences as a valuable aspect of learning and knowledge-making.

Slowing time down

Spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.

William Wordsworth (1800)

From the data analysed on the online course site, it is evident that one never reaches a point of finality. Rather, time slows down to postpone one's commitment to ideas, and the giving of reasons. Each week, students are editing and conceptually reworking their ideas. As such, the online space seems to be a site where one is not held captive by one's thoughts. It is a space where the present can be paused, where the fear of the unknown, the silencing effects of the English language can be suspended, to express the inexpressible. This is the case when Thembi and Sandra express their angst, fears and insecurities at the start of their academic year.

As mentors and tutors in this space, and through a process of trial and error, we came to the realisation that the online space required a very different type of facilitation and participation on our part, in order to accommodate the type of conceptual and analytical learning required by the slowing down of time.

In this third space, we also find students revisiting their definitions of self and alignment to concepts. Thembi begins by defining herself as disadvantaged, then as a Xhosa girl, and finally as a young girl who can write infinite scriptures. It would appear that she explores the reach of these descriptions to present a particular aspect of her identity based on what she perceives will be valued in that instance. Over time, she also revisits her view of identity as fixed to one that can be shaped by one's 'surroundings' and through the choices one makes. It is possible that her transition to the university was a 'critical event' or turning point, making her re-assess the role of the environment on one's identity. We are quite certain that even this moment of stillness or certainty is a temporary one and will be revisited.

Conceptually, the online space is one where fleeting thoughts can be captured and reflected upon to trigger new alterations. In Derrida's (1994) words, it is a moment of stasis, an 'aporia of suspension', where commitment to ideas is not required, and where contradictions are permissible. Thembi and Sandra contradict themselves week after week. Thembi's hatred for English gradually gives way to the strategic use of the language to express her dissenting views and to re-shape her personal narrative in a way that is compatible with her core beliefs and the shifts in context. The online space is therefore a space where 'one can stop and smell the roses', take cognisance of what is happening to one's ideas, how one's thoughts are shaping without being interrupted by other voices. The ability of not interrupting students' voices in the online space while simultaneously creating opportunities and possibilities for intellectual and personal growth through our mentoring interactions with them, are therefore some of the most valuable tools that are needed to promote individual agency and ownership of the learning process. Our roles as facilitators and guides in the online space have led to the realisation that a certain amount of awareness, sensitivity, empathy, openness to other ways of being and acknowledgement of the capital that students bring along with them, is needed on our part, in order to create the

necessary scaffolding needed for deep and meaningful analytical engagement. It is therefore important to recognise that learning and becoming are part of an organic and process-generated activity that develops over time. It's how we set up and facilitate the structures for these processes that takes centre stage.

As such, one could think of the online space as a suspension bridge, a site of incoherence where one can see oscillations of the self. Students' location on that bridge reflects the complex mode of shifting understandings of self and of the concept of identity. This incoherence is precisely what allows for the emergence of a coherent narrative of self over time. The learner's grappling with her identity through these online academic activities begins to call into question traditional learning contexts, what counts as knowledge, what counts as knowing, and the thin line between knowing and being. Therefore, as mentioned, Gutiérrez (2008) might describe the online space as a 'third space' for this very reason in that it opens doors for new modes of engagement and critique, like Thembi's use of the space in which she seeks to reconcile her problematic relationship with English, and in the process inserts herself more boldly in the knowledge-making project. Narratives such as these seek to inform mentors', tutors', lecturers' and institutions' understandings of the lived contexts and struggles faced by students. In saying that, we need to acknowledge that we learn as much from our students as they learn from us. It is this type of learning ethos that can develop and grow out of the type of online intervention and facilitation that we have presented in this paper.

Conclusion

The questions posed in this paper revolve around the affordances of the online space as a tutoring space to promote the analytical mode. Using an academic literacies approach, the paper delved into the writing practices of first year students on the online course site over a semester. In place of the traditional tutoring and mentoring pedagogy, the course site had the functionalities of a blogging website used to scaffold learning, and what spurred the research were the types of engagement enabled online. Using a case study method, we sought to analyse whether specific types of writer identities were promoted online or not, and more importantly, how our two participants Thembi and Sandra critically engaged with the authentic tasks online. Part of this process also required that we reflect on our own roles and responsibilities as online mentors and facilitators in the online space, and the extent to which this related to our roles as lecturers in the face-to-face space.

It emerged that the online tasks contributed to fostering an analytical ethos, an 'analytical mode' among students which led to a more nuanced understanding of course content, and a stronger developing sense of self. The sharing of autobiographical information between students became a stimulus for entering and engaging in the analytical mode, and for inserting themselves in the act of knowing. As a result of the conceptual development, students have been able to hone a more confident authorial voice.

The online space allowed students to express the inexpressible, to share dissident views and slow down learning to trigger deeper grappling with concepts, ideas and generate metacognitive reflections on the links between self and knowing. In the process, it stretched our understanding of the analytical mode itself, to mean not only critical thinking, but a

critical reflection of one's position in relation to the knowledge imparted, with possibilities to imbibe, appropriate or challenge what gets taught. It also made us reassess the traditional roles of those who impart knowledge, especially in light of the new ways of 'being' required by those who facilitate and those who participate online become embedded in the online learning space.

This freedom to interrogate the 'what' on the online space is an interesting finding especially in light of the recent wave of 'decolonising the curriculum'. However, the construction of the online space as some form of utopia misses the point. These insights would not be half as worthwhile if they did not provoke us to ask questions about the constraints of the existing physical tutoring spaces, the challenges they pose for diverse groupings of students and how these could be more adequately addressed through the intersecting modes of mentoring, facilitating and lecturing.

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