AUTHOR:
Martina van Heerden[1] (iD)
Sharita Bharuthram[1] (iD)

AFFILIATION:
[1]University of the Western Cape, South Africa

'Sometimes I wonder if our best really is our best': Tutor reflections on shifting to online tutoring during the COVID-19 pandemic

Abstract

Tutors play an important role in higher education, as they may facilitate learning, promote engagement, and assist with student success. Students also often feel more comfortable seeking assistance from them than from lecturers. Yet, tutors tend to be sidelined in the literature on teaching and learning, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper is framed by an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach and seeks to understand how three tutors in an online academic literacy module experienced the shift to online learning. Data, in the form of personal reflections, were collected online and analysed thematically. It was found that the tutors experienced the shift negatively and they raised practical concerns, as well as interpersonal ones. Implications for tutor training are discussed.

Keywords: *Tutors, academic literacy module, tutor voices, higher education, COVID-19 pandemic*

1. Introduction

The word 'tutor' in higher education may denote a number of different meanings. Though tutors may assist students with many aspects, they are largely meant to facilitate academic success and development (Layton, 2016; McKay, 2016). As such, we often find that a tutor could refer to a 'personal tutor' – someone who is employed to mentor a student on a one-on-one basis (Yale, 2020), or to a writing consultant – someone who is employed at a writing centre to help students improve their writing (Clarence, 2018), or to a small group tutor – someone who facilitates small group discussions (Louw, 2018; Underhill and McDonald, 2010).

While full-time lecturers may also, from time-to-time, facilitate tutorial groups, tutors are generally not full-time academics. Broadly speaking, we may distinguish between professional and student tutors. Professional tutors are usually not enrolled as students at a university, but they might be industry professionals who bring with them discipline-specific knowledge and experience (Shield,

2023) or graduates with a degree in the relevant discipline (Donaldson, 2022). Student tutors, also called peer tutors, are still enrolled at university, usually at postgraduate level, and either work with students on a one-on-one basis, or more often, in small group settings (Pugatch and Wilson, 2018).

Regardless of who they are of who they work with, tutors are usually employed on a non-permanent, fixed-term basis (for example, a term, a semester, or an academic year), and as such are considered 'casual academics' (Baik, Naylor and Corrin, 2018). A casual academic is someone who is not a full-time academic and who might not have the full range of roles and responsibilities as academics; they often assist largely with teaching-related matters such as giving feedback grading (McComb, Eather and Imig, 2021). In our context, a 'tutor' refers to someone (usually a postgraduate student) who is employed on a casual basis to facilitate small group teaching (i.e., tutorials) at a university (Clarence, 2018; Louw, 2018; Siebrits, Stoltenkamp and Mokwele, 2015).

In this paper, we focus specifically on the experiences of three tutors in an academic literacy module at a South African university during the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in the shift to emergency online teaching and learning in an attempt to lessen interpersonal contact so as to prevent the spread of the contagious virus. Academic literacy refers to 'the range of abilities that students have to acquire when starting out in a new academic discipline' (Wingate, 2018: 349). The aim of our module is therefore to equip students with the necessary abilities – literacies – such as reading, writing, thinking, speaking, referencing, and researching they will need to be successful students and professionals. In our module, tutors and tutorials are meant to further facilitate the development of these crucial abilities by building on the lectures. As such, our tutors' responsibilities include facilitating small group sessions (tutorials), guiding class discussions, providing feedback on written assignments, consulting with students about their assignments, grading assignments, attending regular meetings, and providing academic support to students. Given the importance of tutorials for students' learning, engagement, and success (Faroa, 2017; Layton, 2016; Topping, 1996), especially in the South African context (McKay, 2016; Nyawo, 2021), we were particularly interested in how tutors experienced the pandemic-necessitated shift to online learning and teaching, given that this has yet to be widely explored in the existing literature. The paper uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to focus on two main aims: Firstly, to specifically give voice to tutors' experiences during the pandemic, as the focus has largely been on students' and full-time academics' experiences, and secondly, more broadly, top open spaces for including tutors on learning and teaching-related discussions as they have generally been sidelined in the literature (Donaldson, 2022).

2. Literature Review

Tutors and tutorials play an important role in student learning and development, and they may focus on discipline specific academic content or academic literacy (Murray and Nallaya, 2016). They are integral in facilitating student engagement and enabling student success in higher education (Faroa, 2017), and even improving grades (Hardt, Nagler and Rincke, 2023). This is largely due to the fact that tutors are often perceived as being more approachable and understanding than lecturers (Gucciardi, Mach and Mo, 2016), especially since they are often not much older than the students (Abbot, Graf and Chatfield, 2018; Bokser, 2005; Hirst *et al*., 2004). As a result, students often tend to gravitate towards their tutors (rather than their lecturers who may be perceived as intimidating) and students may form lasting

relationships with their tutors (Kahu, Ashley and Picton, 2022). At first year level, tutors are especially important as students are still adjusting to the expectations and requirements of university and having someone they can go to, whom they feel comfortable talking to, can greatly assist with this (Chanock et al., 2012; Hirst et al., 2004; Tapp, 2015). Consequently, tutors can increase students' confidence and foster a sense of belonging at higher education (Hassan, 2022; Lydster and Murray, 2019; Yale, 2020), which is crucial for engagement and success. Moreover, the support that tutors provide may extend beyond the tutorial classroom (Chanock et al., 2012; Hallet, 2013; Grey and Osborne, 2020; Stephen, O'Connell and Hall, 2008), which not only deepens the relationship between tutor and student, but also the related effectiveness of tutors and tutorials.

Moreover, the tutorial space – due to its smaller size and interpersonal familiarity – may also assist students. Tutorials often provide a space where tutors can enable and encourage students to feel comfortable with questioning, grappling with, and understanding various topics and assignments (Clarence, 2018; Gucciardi et al., 2016; Underhill and McDonald, 2010). Even during the pandemic, when tutorials shifted online, tutorials remained helpful (Nyawo, 2021). An academic literacy module tutorial, in particular, given that it focuses on facilitating the development of the necessary academic skills, may also provide a space where students can become more familiar with the ways of doing, being, and knowing of the university (Brown and Johnson, 2009; Chanock et al., 2012; Siebrits et al., 2015), which in turn could also lead to a greater sense of belonging at university (Bokser, 2005; Hallet, 2013; Hirst et al., 2004).

Despite the important role that tutors play in student learning and development, they often occupy a largely liminal role. Institutionally, for example, they occupy a space somewhere between being students and being staff (Abbot et al., 2018). They are simultaneously an integral part of the teaching team, often carrying out a large portion of teaching-related tasks at undergraduate level (such as giving feedback on assignments, grading assignments, and leading small group discussions) (McComb et al., 2021; Crimmins, Oprescu and Nash, 2017), yet they are also largely excluded from decision-making, committee work, and other academic work.

Similarly, in the literature, they are also often sidelined, and they tend to be focused on in relation to students, rather than as separate research subjects. For example, research related to tutorial matters tend to be comparative, such as comparing student and tutor feedback practices (e.g., Hamer et al., 2014), comparing student and tutor grades (Bharuthram, 2018), comparing student and tutor perceptions of classroom interactions (e.g., Hardman, 2016), oracy skills (e.g., Heron et al., 2018), and reading lists (e.g., Stokes and Martin, 2008). Tutors, themselves, are often not the direct focus of research (Donaldson, 2022). Even during the surge in teaching and learning related research during the COVID-19 pandemic, tutor voices were largely silent, with only a few papers devoted to examining their perceptions of online learning (see, for example, Almahasees, Mohsin and Amin, 2021; Dodo-Balue, 2022). Yet, as integral members of the teaching team, tutors could provide valuable insight into teaching and learning practices, especially in academic literacy modules.

3. Theoretical framework

In order to fully examine the experiences and perceptions of the tutors working in our academic literacy module during the pandemic, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used. IPA draws on phenomenology, which focuses on studying people's experiences, hermeneutics, which is the theory of interpretation, and idiography, which focuses on the particular (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012). IPA enables us to understand how people in specific contexts make sense of 'particular experiential phenomena (an event, process or relationship)' (Smith *et al*., 2012: 29). This is appropriate for our paper, as we are concerned with how tutors experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and specifically how they experienced teaching and learning during this time. The pandemic-necessitated shift to online teaching and learning was a particular phenomenon that greatly shifted the traditional classroom experience, and this shift lead to changes in experiences and perceptions. IPA is also appropriate as it tends to focus on a small number of participants (Smith *et al*., 2012) – in our case, we are focusing on three tutors' experiences. These tutors' experiences are not meant to be representative of all tutors' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, rather the aim is to focus specifically on these tutors' experiences. From these, we can then tease out claims that might apply to all three (Smith and Osborn, 2015; Smith *et al*., 2012).

4. Research context

The research study is situated within a compulsory Academic Literacies module offered to first-year undergraduate students in various faculties at a South African university. The tutorials are fully integrated into the module outline, so as to maximise the impact of tutorials (Louw, 2018), and have a strong practical component built into it, with tutors facilitating activities and discussions on a range of topics introduced in the lectures (such as reflection, argumentative writing, and presentation skills). Tutors meet once a week with their tutorial groups, during which they complete activities with students that are meant to further facilitate the development of discipline-specific academic literacies. Tutors also provide detailed written formative feedback on assignment drafts, oral group feedback in the tutorial period, and consult individually with their students throughout the course. Tutors are issued weekly guidelines about what to focus on in the tutorial (though tutors are free to select how these goals are met), and formative feedback training is provided at the start of the module and throughout the semester via moderation meetings.

However, much of this had to change with the shift to online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The tutorials, in particular, underwent a change in format as students were now expected to complete tasks ahead of the tutorial and then get feedback and discuss the activity in class, whereas before they would complete the activity in class, while discussing it and getting feedback. The shift to online teaching and learning also proved quite challenging at the university at large as many students lacked the necessary resources, such as laptops or internet access and connectivity, to fully participate in online teaching and learning. This, in particular, greatly affected tutorial attendance, which was much lower, and participation, which was not as forthcoming and spontaneous as in the face-to-face context. Although synchronous participation was preferred, students were also given the opportunity to participate asynchronously in tutorial activities and discussions via the university's online Learning Management System (LMS). Despite the changes, the tutorials remain an integral part of the module.

5. Methods

The paper presents the reflective responses from three tutors in the module. Reflections are not only important in terms of self-development and improving practice but are also a valuable source of data by giving voice to the lived experiences of the research subjects (Mortari, 2015). Their responses were collected through an online questionnaire which was sent out via Google Forms. The questionnaires had a combination of close-ended and open-ended, reflective questions. The close-ended questions were used to obtain background information from the tutors, while the open-ended, reflective questions were used to obtain a sense of tutors' experiences and perceptions of online teaching and learning. The questions were phrased in a deliberately broad manner (e.g., What are your thoughts about tutoring in general?) so as to enable tutors to reflect on whatever aspect of (online) tutoring they prefer. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university's relevant ethics committee (HS21/3/9). Respondents were informed of the purpose of the study via an informational section on the online questionnaire. Respondents were also informed that participation was voluntary, and that there would be no repercussions if they did not participate. All respondents gave their informed consent. Responses were anonymised and the respondent-tutors were able to select pseudonyms for themselves, which ensured confidentiality.

All three respondents were female Master's students - they therefore occupied a liminal space in terms of being both students themselves and being in authority positions in relation to their students. At the time of data collection, the three respondents had different levels of tutoring experience. Star was a first-time tutor, Haesu had 3-5 years' experience, and Anna had 6+ years of experience. Haesu and Anna had started tutoring before the pandemic, and therefore had experience with both face-to-face and online tutoring. Star therefore was the only tutor who, at the time of the study, had not conducted face-to-face tutoring sessions. The different levels of experience therefore provide potentially differing perspectives to the same phenomenon. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographics of the tutors.

Table 1:   Overview of respondents

Name	Age	Race	Sex	Experience	Degree
Star	31-40	African	Female	First time tutor	MA
Haesu	31-40	African	Female	3-5 years	MA
Anna	31-40	Coloured	Female	6+ years	MA

Data was analysed using IPA. We focused on the reflections of each tutor, reading through their responses repeatedly. We then noted specific words and phrases and made comments about these, and then started looking for themes that emerged within each reflection and across the different reflections (Smith *et al.*, 2012). As such, in the section below, we first focus on the individual reflections, before considering what some of the emerging themes were. The next section has been organised into sub-sections, with each sub-section providing the reflective account of each tutor, starting with the least experienced tutor (Star) and ending with the most experienced tutor (Anna). Each reflection starts by providing the tutor's views on tutoring in general and then shifts to their experiences and perceptions of online tutoring during the pandemic. We focused on these two aspects to get a sense of how they normally perceived and experienced tutoring so that we could compare their online experience to this.

6. Results and discussion

6.1 Star

As a first-time tutor, Star's reflection on tutoring in general indicates that she sees tutoring and tutorials as a way to help students and as something that is enjoyable.

> *Tutoring is in essence an opportunity to assist those that need help in a certain area. I enjoy helping students and sharing information that would be helpful to them.*

Her understanding of tutoring aligns with the practical, helpful nature of tutorials that is seen in the literature (see, for example, Abbot *et al*., 2018; Faroa, 2017; Louw, 2018).

In contrast, her views on online tutoring suggest a more sobering view. She highlights both interpersonal variables (such as students not participating), as well as practical considerations (such as resources):

> *Students are not very willing to participate. There is a sense of isolation. The connection between the teacher and learning is missing. It is much harder to build a relationship with your learners. Moreover, students that are not computer literate will find it more difficult to cope. There are limitations of resources for some students such as data, smartphones [and] laptops, which might be expensive especially for those from poor households who end [up] being left behind. Some students do not take online tutorials seriously as compared to face to face tutorials. There is also the issue of load shedding1 which can disrupt the tutoring online.*

When reflecting on online tutoring, she emphasises negative aspects of it, for example, that students 'do not take online tutorials seriously', which contrasts with her more optimistic view on tutoring in general as something that will help others. This suggests a kind of disappointment in her students, that while she knows tutoring is helpful, her students not taking it seriously suggests that *they* do not see it as useful. What does become apparent from Star's reflection is the importance of relationships and connections in tutoring, as she highlights the sense of 'isolation' and lack of 'connection' between herself and her students. This may negatively impact her teaching, as her perceived lack of connection to her students may impact how she sees herself as a tutor and may negatively impact students' confidence and sense of belonging (Brown and Johnson, 2009; Yale, 2020). For Star, the shift to online teaching seems to have negatively impacted her, which may spill into future classes, regardless of mode, as Star's preconceived notion of what tutoring means seems to be clashing with her experience thereof.

6.2 Haesu

Haesu's views on tutoring in general are fairly positive and she focuses specifically on the advantages that it may have for her and her own professional advancement:

> *I love tutoring. I want to be a professor one day and also work in research. Tutoring affords me the opportunity to pursue and develop skills in both. I'm also quite shy and introverted and often sought out books to fill the void. As a consequence, I had all this knowledge that I didn't know what to do with. Tutoring helps with creating interpersonal relationships and is a constant wellspring on ideas about learning and how to help the students. It might be frustrating at times but well worth it.*

---

1   Loadshedding refers to scheduled disruptions in electricity provision in South Africa due to the national electricity provider not being able to meet electricity demands, which results in households not having electricity for between two and four hours (depending on the loadshedding stage). These have taken place since 2007 and have increased in frequency and severity in the last few years.

With the exception of one mention of tutoring being 'frustrating', Haesu's reflection shows a generally positive view on tutoring. For example, she focuses on the opportunities it provides her to develop her own skills. This seems to be in contrast to literature that often speaks to the lack of professional development opportunities afforded tutors (Richardson, and Suseno Wardale, 2021). Instead, Haesu seems to view tutoring as an act of professional development in itself, that is, that tutoring enables her to develop and improve her teaching skills that would make her a professor 'one day' (Gucciardi, *et al*., 2016). Rather interestingly, she refers to herself as 'shy and introverted', but this does not seem to impact her perceived confidence in her own ability to be a tutor, that tutoring is 'well worth it'. As with Star, there is an emphasis on interpersonal aspects and on sharing knowledge and helping students (Grey and Osborne, 2020).

In contrast to her more positive views on tutoring in general, her view on online tutoring largely focuses on negative aspects such as interpersonal variables and teaching-related anxieties:

> *Moving to online tutoring meant having to arrange for a lot of things: good internet connection, private space, navigating as of yet unfamiliar portals, etc. Online tutoring can be quite passive. Only some students may participate in discussions, and you can't exactly call them out either. Nervousness, anxiety, all these are enhanced on both sides, and it can get very uncomfortable. In the online context, students can take advantage of lecturers and tutors to capitalize on the pandemic hysteria. It's difficult to sift the truth from the lies and I've found that maintaining a neutral stance helps streamline their prodding. The lack of a visible authority figure is both a blessing and a curse. Strict deadlines, shutoffs from iKamva have helped create a sense of virtual responsibility, a trade off in which they have to participate if they want to learn. It's frustrating for those who genuinely have problems with connection, internet availability and the need for extra textual material and we help as much as we can but this frustration is compounded by those who are genuinely taking advantage of the situation to not do their work and turn up on the 11th hour hoping for a quick fix. It's been a learning experience and a sobering one too. Sometimes I wonder if our best really is our best.*

Haesu's reflection highlights two main points. Firstly, she acknowledged that the online tutoring environment is quite passive (which implies a contrast to the more active face-to-face classroom environment of what she is used to). This is similar to Star's worries about the lack of interaction between students and students-and-tutor. Other studies have also focused on the impact of online teaching on student interaction during the pandemic (see, for example, Azmat and Ahmad, 2022), which in itself has been a broader concern in online teaching and learning; that is, that the online classroom does not provide the same level of active interpersonal interaction and engagement as a face-to-face classroom (see, for example, Bouhnik and Marcus, 2006; Robinson and Hullinger, 2008). Secondly, Haesu highlights the anxiety experienced by 'both sides' which suggests that despite her experience, her own anxiety has been heightened by the shift to online learning and the concomitant adjustments to practice and expectations, similar to the anxieties that students may be experiencing (see, for example, Savitsky *et al*., 2020) Perhaps rather tellingly, her worries about whether 'our best really is our best' suggests that there are some serious concerns about tutoring online. In general, tutoring may cause tutors some initial anxiety, especially regarding their role and their effectiveness (Gucciardi, *et al*. 2016). For Haesu, regardless of her experience, the shift to online learning seems to have re-ignited these anxieties, and she is left with a sense of unease and anxiety about her effectiveness as a tutor.

6.3 Anna

The reflection by Anna, as the most senior tutor in the study, shows throughout an understanding of the complexities of tutoring and she touches on some of the issues regarding the positionality of tutors. As with Star and Haesu's reflections, Anna's reflection also highlights the importance of tutors and tutorials for students.

> *Tutoring is extremely important at tertiary level, especially considering the fact that a tutorial group is smaller than a lecture group. This means that more attention can be given to a student to assist them. Often one finds that the tutor is instrumental in getting students to understand the work better and improve their overall academic performance. A tutor can also inspire students and boost their confidence. Especially if a tutor can speak from their own experience as a student. This makes students feel more comfortable when engaging with their tutor. Unfortunately, not all tertiary institutions value the importance of tutoring though. Some see it as unnecessary. I have spoken to tutors of other tertiary institutions as well and the experiences are not the same. Tutoring plays such an important role in developing certain skills whether it is comprehension or critical thinking skills or even just simple basic things such as proper email etiquette etc. In other words, not just skills related to the content of the course/module. In terms of remuneration, there is also discrepancies in this regard. Often times, tutors are expected to do the bulk of the work in terms of marking etc. within a short period of time. One of the main issues that many don't realise is that the marking time depends on the quality of the work submitted. e.g., There are times when it can take up to 2 days just to mark an assessment from one group. I feel like sometimes allowances are not really made for all these other situations. Therefore, a tutor cannot really be paid only for a certain amount of hours as most times, this is exceeded by far (tutors are even often required to mark during weekends and even vac periods).*

Anna's reflection shows a deeper awareness of tutoring and what it entails. Her focus is on what the advantage of tutoring is for students, that tutors can 'inspire', 'boost confidence', help students 'understand' and 'improve'. This points to the many roles that tutors play (Grey and Osborne, 2020). This is slightly different from Star and Haesu who largely focused on what tutoring means for them, personally. This focus on what tutorials can do suggests that Anna has internalised the roles and responsibilities of being a tutor and suggests her experience. She also refers to students being 'more comfortable' with their tutor – similar to what research has shown (Brown and Johnson, 2009; Dodo-Balu, 2022; Siebrits *et al*., 2015). On a more practical level, her reflection also points to the undervaluing of tutors, especially in relation to remuneration (Dodo-Balu, 2021; Ryan *et al*., 2013; Richardson *et al*., 2021), as well as the workload that tutors have to carry (Baik *et al*., 2018; Ryan *et al*., 2013).

Anna's reflection of her experience with online tutoring presents a more nuanced view, as she highlights that there are both advantages and disadvantages. As with Star's and Haesu's reflections, she also highlights the sense of disconnection between tutor and student that is present in the online classroom - especially given that she is used to a more personal, direct relationship with students.

> *The initial shift to online learning made me unsure as I did not know what to expect and to what extent we would be tutoring online. Little did we know of the challenges that awaited us. Tutoring online has its advantages (e.g., learning particular skills) and disadvantages (e.g., very time consuming). The use of technology is important as well for students to gain certain skills that would not have necessarily been taught to them face to face.*

> *However, there should be ample support structures in place for both tutors and students. Especially since, with online tutoring it can be difficult to ensure that each student is maximising his/her potential. One cannot really check up on the student in [as] much detail as what you would face to face. It also affects teaching in such a way that one has to really think about ways to ensure that students understand the work. This means that the instructions for assessments and the feedback provided to students has to be even more detailed, explicitly, and thorough. In as simple terms as possible.*

In contrast to Star and Haesu's reflections, Anna focuses a lot more on the responsibilities of the tutor – what should be done to better facilitate students' development. For example, she highlights that she has to 'really think about ways to ensure that students understand the work', which suggests that her usual way of teaching is being challenged and that she has to find new ways of being as effective as before. Similarly, despite her experience she was 'unsure' about what lay before her (this is similar to Haesu, who also seemed to struggle with her position as tutor during the pandemic). She also highlights the increased workload, for example that feedback has to be 'even more detailed, explicit[...] and thorough', as she is not able to rely on the same mechanisms as she would have in face-to-face contexts, such as consultations or feedback discussion classes. Similar to Star and Haesu's reflections, she highlights the difficulties of the online classroom, and specifically the sense of disconnectedness from students – that she is not able to 'check up on the student' in the same way, thereby suggesting the lack of interpersonal relationships that makes tutoring so important (see, for example, Kahu *et al*., 2022).

7. Implications

Using IPA, this paper has unpacked the experiences that three tutors had of the pandemic-necessitated shift to online teaching and learning in an academic literacy module. Having unpacked each tutor's reflection individually, we can see that there are some distinct themes emerging across their reflections. Firstly, all three highlighted a number of practical concerns, such as challenges experienced related to a lack of resources (for both students and tutors) and workload. Secondly, all three highlighted the importance of interpersonal interaction for tutoring, by emphasizing that they felt disconnected from their students. The effectiveness of tutoring in large part depends on the interaction between students and tutors and to feel like that interaction is missing would have greatly impacted how the tutors perceived their effectiveness as tutors. Thirdly, what underlies each of these reflections is the sense the move to online teaching seems to have made them (re)consider their tutoring practices, their perceived effectiveness, and their identities as tutors. This can especially be seen in how the reflections on tutoring in general suggests a lot more confidence and certainty about what tutoring and tutorials entail.

The aim of this paper was twofold: to give voice to tutors' experiences during the pandemic and to start opening up spaces for including tutors in conversations around teaching and learning. What we have shown is that the three tutors in this paper seems to have had a difficult time during the pandemic, largely due to the lack of interpersonal interaction and relationships that they usually depended on. What they have highlighted is that the strength of tutorials lies in these interpersonal interactions, where students and tutors can engage with each other, get to know each other, learn from and with each other (Kahu *et al*., 2022; Lydster and Murray, 2019). Tutor training initiatives – an important part of all tutorial programmes (Faroa, 2017; Grey and Osborne, 2020) – should therefore focus on how to best foster these interactions and relationships in any context, as well as how to manage situations where it is not fully possible.

While the aim of this paper was not to present generalisable findings, but to start including tutor voices in discussions surrounding teaching and learning matters, it is necessary to acknowledge that this study may be slightly limited as it presents the reflections of only three tutors at one South African Higher Education institution and thus may not be reflective of all tutors' experiences. Nevertheless, these reflections from these tutors provide useful insight into how tutors experienced the shift to online teaching and the challenges they experienced ontologically and practically. The findings could be used in tutor training for new and experienced tutors in how to navigate feelings of isolation (in an online context) or disconnect (in face-to-face contexts) so that it does not negatively impact tutors' sense of confidence in themselves. These findings could also serve as a basis for further conversations around tutor development and as a starting point for including tutor's distinct voices in research and discussions on teaching and learning.

References

Abbot, S., Graf, A.J. & Chatfield, B. 2018. Listening to undergraduate peer tutors: Roles, relationships, and challenges. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 30(2): 245-261. Available at https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1185097 [Accessed 24 November 2023].

Almahasees, Z., Mohsin, K. & O.A. Mohammad. (2021). Faculty and students' perceptions of online learning during COVID-19. *Frontiers in Education*, 6: Article 638470. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.638470

Azmat, M. & Ahmad, A. 2022. Lack of social interaction in online classes during COVID-19. *Journal of Materials and Environment Science*, 13(2): 185-196. Available at https://www.jmaterenvironsci.com/Document/vol13/vol13_N2/JMES-2022-13015-Azmat.pdf [Accessed 24 November 2023].

Baik, C., Naylor, R. & Corrin, L. 2018. Developing a framework for university-wide improvement in the training and support of 'casual academics'. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 40(4): 375-389. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2018.1479948

Bharuthram, S. 2018. Evaluation of assessment skills using essay rubrics in student self-grading at first year level in higher education: A case study. *Journal for Language Teaching*, 52(1): 2-22. doi: 10.4314/jlt.v52i1.1

Bokser, J. 2005. Pedagogies of belonging: Listening to students and peers. *Writing Center Journal*, 25(1): 43-60. https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1573

Bouhnik, D. & Marcus, T. 2006. Interaction in distance-learning courses. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 57(3): 299-305. https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.20277

Brown, K. & Johnson, E.M. 2009. Academic literacy development: A multiple perspectives approach to blended learning. In *Proceedings of ascilite Auckland* 332-337. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242084989_Academic_literacy_development_A_multiple_perspectives_approach_to_blended_learning [Accessed 25 November 2023].

Chanock, K., Horton, C., Reedman, M. & Stephenson, B. 2012. Collaborating to embed academic literacies and personal support in first year discipline subjects. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 9(3): Article 3. https://doi.org/10.53761/1.9.3.3

Clarence, S. 2018. Towards inclusive, participatory peer tutor development in higher education. *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning*, 6(1): 58-74. https://doi.org/10.14426/cristal.v6i1.141

Crimmins, G., Oprescu, F. & Nash, G. 2017. Three pathways to support the professional and career development of casual academics. *International Journal of Academic Development*, 22(2): 144-165. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2016.1263962

Dodo-Balu, A. 2022. Hidden in plain sight: Contrasting management and student perceptions of the value of casual teachers in online higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46(2): 198-210. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1900800

Donaldson, M. 2022. Role identity in professional community college tutors. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice.* https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2022.2056776

Faroa, B.D. 2017. Considering the role of tutoring in student engagement: Reflections from a South African university. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 5(2): 1-15. https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v5i2.2699

Grey, D. & Osborne, C. 2020. Perceptions and principles of personal tutoring. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(3): 285-299. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1536258

Gucciardi, A., Mach, C. & Mo, S. 2016. Student-faculty team teaching: A collaborative learning approach. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 24(5): 441-445. https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2016.1270899

Hallet, F. 2013. Study support and development of academic literacy in higher education: A phenomenographic analysis. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18(5): 518-530. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2012.752725

Hamer, J., Purchase, H., Luxton-Reilly, A. & Denny, P. 2014. A comparison of peer and tutor feedback. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 40(1): 151-164. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2014.893418

Hardman, J. 2016. Tutor-student interactions in seminar teaching: Implications for professional development. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 17(1): 64-76. https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787415616728

Hardt, D., Nagler, M. & Rincke, J. 2023. Tutoring in (online) higher education: Experimental evidence. *Economics of Education Review*, 92: 1-10. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4031193

Hassan, S.L. 2022. Reducing the colonial footprint through tutorials: A South African perspective on the decolonization of education. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 36(5): 77-97. https://doi.org/10.20853/36-5-4325

Heron, M., Dippold, D., Hosein, A., Sullivan, A.K., Aksit, T., Adsit, N., Doubleday, J. & McKewon, K. 2021. Talking about talk: Tutor and student expectations of oracy skills in higher education. *Language and Education*, 35(4): 285-300. https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2021.1895206

Hirst, E., Henderson, R., Allan, M., Bode, J. & Kocatepe, M. 2004. Repositioning academic literacy: Charting the emergence of a community of practice. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 27(1): 66-80. Available at https://research.usq.edu.au/download/ae51233354356307df2198fa2dcd7bbe5adb7322570f4415f460aaa37e3923ac/127236/Hirst_Henderson_Allan_Bode_Kocatepe_2004_PV.pdf [Accessed 26 November 2023].

Kahu, E.R., Ashley, N. & Picton, C. 2022. Exploring the complexity of first-year student belonging in higher education: Familiarity, interpersonal, and academic belonging. *Student Success*, 13(2): 10-20. https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.2264

Layton, D.M. 2015. The role of the tutorial system in enabling students' academic success. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 29(4): 198-210. https://doi.org/10.20853/29-4-513

Louw, I. 2018. Reclaiming tutorials as learning spaces in the sciences. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 26(3): 320-355. https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2018.1511952

Lydster, C. & Murray, J. 2019. 'Not just a tutor': Successful supplementary tuition for Australian Indigenous students in higher education. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning*, 13(1): A140-A160. Available at https://journal.aall.org.au/index.php/jall/article/view/609 [Accessed 24 November 2023].

McComb, V., Eather, N. & Imig, S. 2021. Casual academic staff experiences in higher education: Insights for academic development. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 26(1): 95-105. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2020.1827259

McKay, T.M. 2016. Do tutors matter? Assessing the impact of tutors on first-year academic performance at a South African university. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 4(1): 53-64. https://doi.org/10.14426/jsaa.v4i1.144

Mortari, L. 2015. Reflectivity in research practice: An overview of different perspectives. *International Journal of Qualitative methods*, 14(5):1-9. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069 15618045

Murray, N. & Nallaya, S. 2016. Embedding academic literacies in university programme curricula: A case study. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(7): 1296-1312. https://doi.org/10.108 0/03075079.2014.981150

Nyawo, J.C. 2021. A comparison of undergraduate students' perception of tutorials before and during the COVID-19: A case of the University of Kwazulu-Natal in the discipline of Public Governance. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 10(2): 217-228. https://doi. org/10.5430/ijhe.v10n2p217

Pugatch, T. & Wilson, N. 2018. Nudging study habits: A field experiment on peer tutoring in higher education. *Economics of Education Review*, 62: 151-161. https://doi.org/10.1016/j. econedurev.2017.11.003

Richardson, J., Suseno Y. & Wardale, D. 2021. The paradoxical management of casual academics: An Australian case study. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 40(2): 370-385. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1756749

Robinson, C.C. & Hulliner, H. 2008. New benchmarks in higher education: Student engagement in online learning. *Journal of Education for Business*, 84(2): 101-109. https://doi.org/10.3200/ JOEB.84.2.101-109

Ryan, S., Burgess, J., Connell, J. & Groen, E. 2013. Casual academic staff in an Australian university: Marginalised and excluded. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 19(2): 161-175. https://doi.org/10.1080/13583883.2013.783617

Savitsky, B., Findling, Y., Ereli, A. & Hendel, T. 2020. Anxiety and coping strategies among nursing students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Nurse Education in Practice*, 46:1-7. https:// doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2020.102809

Shield, W. 2023. The role of academic and professional tutors in supporting trainee educational psychologist wellbeing. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 39(1): 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2022.2148635

Siebrits, A., Stoltenkamp, J. & Mokwele, T. 2015. The impact of tutoring in the digital academic literacy programme on graduate attributes at the university of the Western Cape. *Advances in Research*, 5(4): 1-31. https://doi.org/10.9734/AIR/2015/18995

Smith, J.A., Flowers, P. & Larkin, M. 2012. *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. London: Sage.

Smith, J.A. & Osborn, M. 2015. Interpretative phenomenological analysis as a useful methodology for research on the lived experience of pain. *British Journal of Pain*, 9(1): 41-42. https://doi.org/10 .1177/2049463714541642

Stephen, D.E., O'Connell, P. & Hall, M. 2008. 'Going the extra mile', 'fire-fighting', or laissez-faire? Re-evaluating personal tutoring relationships within mass higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13(4): 449-460. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510802169749

Stokes, P. & Martin, L. 2008. Reading lists: A study of tutor and student perceptions, expectations and realities. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(2): 113-125. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070801915874

Tapp, J. 2015. Framing the curriculum for participation: A Bernsteinian perspective on academic literacies. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 20(7): 711-722. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2015.1069266

Topping, K.J. 1996. The effectiveness of peer tutoring in further and higher education: A typology and review of the literature. *Higher Education*, 32(3): 321-345. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00138870

Underhill, J. & McDonald, J. 2020. Collaborative tutor development: Enabling a transformative paradigm in a South African university. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 18(2): 91-106. https://doi.org/10.1080/13611261003678853

Wingate, U. 2018. Academic literacy across the curriculum: Towards a collaborative instructional approach. *Language Teaching*, 51(3): 349-364. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444816000264

Yale, A.T. 2020. Quality matters: An in-depth exploration of the student-personal tutor relationship in higher education from the student perspective. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(6): 739-752. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1596235