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The social uses of the online chatroom as a boundary object for the acquisition of academic literacy in pandemic times

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a catalyst for ongoing pedagogic changes in the higher education landscape, especially with the use of online modes of delivery. The digital shift triggered questions around student engagement and the need to ensure that, despite physical distancing, students did not feel alienated from online learning spaces. This was part and parcel of our ethics of care prerogative. In the context of teaching academic literacy online, our teaching experiences have prompted us to interrogate how we understand student participation and sense-making in online spaces during the pandemic. This is particularly important for us, as we view academic literacy as a set of socially embedded practices rather than decontextualised skills (Street, 1983).

We argue that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the online chatroom as a boundary object (Bowker & Star, 2000) was recruited as a proxy for the traditional classroom. We focus on how this boundary object was recruited by us as academic literacy lecturers in our first-year academic literacy course to realise certain features of our pedagogy of discomfort. Through a critical discourse analysis of written interactions in the chatroom, we explore how we as lecturers constrained the multiple social uses of the chatroom in order to imbue it with a particular function, a sense-making space for the acquisition of academic literacy in the context of 'Emergency Remote Teaching'.

Keywords: *academic literacies, boundary object, chatroom, critical discourse analysis, pedagogy of discomfort, social uses.*

1. Introduction

Cities witnessed blue skies after years of smog, and "the birds took back their language" (Atwood, 1998), as humans caged themselves in silent anticipation of vaccines, cures and freedom. The pandemic may have locked people in, but it unlocked their imagination to unprecedented possibilities. At higher education institutions like our South African institution, there were attempts to exhort academics to act fast through policies such as Emergency Remote Teaching

(ERT). Teaching during the pandemic laid bare enduring inequalities, calling for measures to ensure that higher education did not further entrench the existing divides (Badat, 2020; USAf, 2020).

For us, it was not 'business as usual', but the empty campuses were brimming with activity elsewhere on a Learning Management System (LMS) that we had to embrace overnight as the substitute teaching and learning space. In the frenzy of ERT and later Physically Distanced Learning (PBL), some feared that quality would give way to expediency, while others harnessed the affordances of the LMS to revamp their pedagogies and innovate while seeking to be inclusive.

We teach an academic literacy course offered to first-year Humanities students in the second semester in preparation for their second year of studies where the focus on research writing and critical reading practices becomes more pronounced. These practices are introduced to students through the themes of identity and migration, and throughout the course, students answer the central question, 'What happens to identity when people cross borders?' Prior to the pandemic, students would conduct fieldwork and interview refugees about their experiences. Due to social distancing, we needed to revisit our teaching approaches and expectations, and resorted to giving students access to secondary data in the form of a video recording of an interview we had previously conducted with a refugee.

We sought to be inclusive through low technological demands but, more importantly, through a pedagogic strategy that would allow students to discuss and write about the relevance of theory and concepts to their autobiographies, cross-disciplinary knowledge and contexts. We came to call this strategy the Looping Back Mechanism (LBM). The LBM is aligned with our view of academic literacy itself as situated practice (Street, 1983; Lillis & Harrington, 2015), rather than a decontextualised and neutral skill. The LBM was already in place prior to the pandemic (Arend *et al.*, 2017; Hunma *et al.*, 2019), but took on a different magnitude in the context of remote teaching. We needed to operationalise the features of our chatroom carefully at the service of our pedagogy of discomfort and its LBM to ensure that geographical remoteness was not synonymous with forms of academic exclusion.

This paper discusses how the chatroom of the LMS acted as a 'boundary object' (Bowker & Star, 2000) in our course during ERT, connecting us to students from various contexts, and how it was recruited in particular ways as a proxy for the academic literacy classroom to realise our pedagogy. Using critical discourse analysis of two vignettes, we analysed the written interactions in the chatroom to highlight the multiple social uses of the online chatroom and how these were constrained by the lecturers to enable the realisation of various aspects of our pedagogy of discomfort and its LBM. In the absence of physical extraverbal cues on the online platform, we argued that the live interactions render novel meanings to participants' engagement, with creative uses of language to approximate or compensate for face-to-face engagement. We thus explored the different meanings and functions of the chatroom in mediating learning on the academic literacy course.

2. The online chatroom as a boundary object

2.1 Boundary objects and their uses and meanings in situated contexts

Bowker and Star (2000: 297) describe boundary objects as "both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites". They add that boundary objects are "weakly structured" across social contexts, but "strongly structured" in local use. What allows the boundary object to serve as a nexus between different social contexts is its 'interpretive flexibility' or 'functional blankness' (Brown & Capdevilla, 1999:40). Those who recruit boundary objects in local use where they are strongly structured, are 'near-sighted' and therefore understand the object better in its local use than its function across contexts (Gomart & Hennion, 1999: 238).

Law (1999: 11-12) argues that the "objects which we study, the objects in which we are caught up, [...] are always more than one and less than many". They occupy a place in the social world "[s]omewhere in between contexts [...]". Law (2002), for example, demonstrates how an object in the United Kingdom, the TSR 2 aircraft, became the nexus for establishing interactions between contexts and between various subjects. He argues that

> an object such as an aircraft – an "individual" and "specific" aircraft – comes in different versions. It has no single center. It is multiple. And yet these various versions also interfere with one another and shuffle themselves together to make a single aircraft. They make what I will call singularities, or singular objects out of their multiplicity. In short they make objects that cohere (Law, 2002: 2-3).

Law and Callon (1992:24) note that the TSR 2 possessed "a high degree of interpretive flexibility" and because of this quality, it is recruited differently by various users. For the Ministry of Defence and the Royal Airforce, the TSR 2 was not seen as a bomber, but as a tactical strike and reconnaissance (TSR) aircraft. For the Treasury, it was seen as an aircraft that was relatively cheap to design and build and could therefore serve their interests to save on expenses. For the Navy, it was a good alternative to the Buccaneer (an aircraft as well), and for the Ministry of Supply, it demonstrated the industrial policies of the government at the time. Although the TSR 2 project never ended in success, the various social uses of the TSR 2 were drawn together without them being centred, thus creating some form of fractional coherence across contexts. The 'in between-ness' of boundary objects that becomes apparent in the different ways they are recruited by various users raises questions about how coherence is created across contexts. Law (2002:2) solves this apparent conundrum by arguing that instead of speaking of coherence, it is more useful to speak of "fractional coherence" when dealing with boundary objects. He argues that fractional coherence involves "drawing things together without centring them" (Law, 1999:11-12). This characteristic of boundary objects makes them malleable enough for different users to use them in various ways and in doing so, imbue them with different meanings and functions.

2.2 The chatroom as a boundary object in the context of Covid-19

In the context of the pandemic, where lecturers, students and administrators were scattered across the landscape, we argue that the chatroom served as a boundary object, a nexus between the world of the academy and that of students.

Initially, the chatroom was weakly structured in terms of having various interpretations trans-contextually, but it became strongly structured when it was harnessed by the lecturers to facilitate teaching and learning in a fully online mode on our academic literacy course. This strong structuring in local use required that the chatroom be repurposed. For example, it became a proxy for the physical classroom to generate discussion on course concepts, but also to get to know who our students were in the absence of in-person contact.

The CDA below of written chatroom discussions shows how both lecturers and students were recruiting the chatroom in multiple ways. The analysis demonstrates how lecturers' interactions in the chatroom reflect their efforts to operationalise the LBM, one of the key features of the pedagogy of discomfort in the course as a strategy to transform the chatroom into a meaning-making space for the acquisition of academic literacy.

3. Critical discourse analysis

CDA is an analytical framework that surfaces the social uses of texts and the power asymmetries implicated in them. For the purposes of this paper, we specifically use the multi-layered framework proposed by Fairclough (1992) to analyse two vignettes of online classroom chats at the textual, discursive practice and social practice levels. The analysis aims to explore the social uses of the chatroom space and how it is being harnessed by lecturers to realise the LBM.
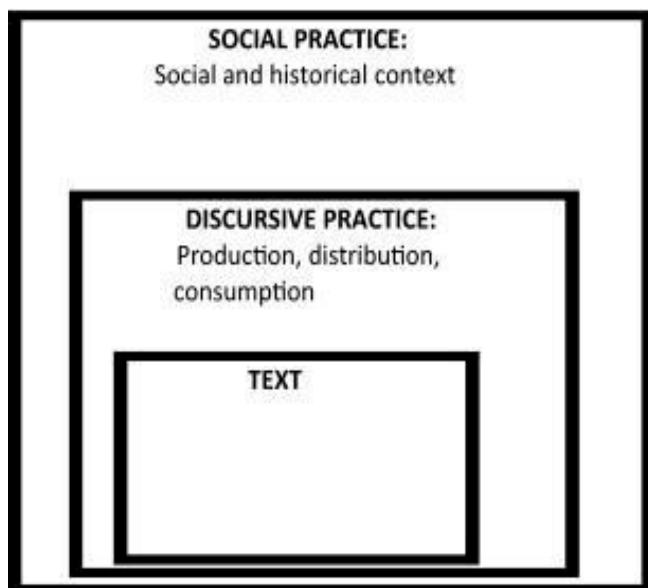

Figure 1: Fairclough's (1992) model for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

This diagram illustrates three inter-related dimensions of discourse:

1. The object of analysis (written, verbal, visual or combinations of modes).
2. The processes by means of which the object is produced and received (writing, speaking, designing, reading) by individuals.
3. The socio-historical conditions which govern these processes.

Each requires a different kind of analysis:

1. Text analysis (description)
2. Processing analysis (interpretation)
3. Social analysis (explanation)

At the textual level, we pay attention to the lexical items, cohesive devices, structure and emoticons in the online space and what they index about the social uses of the chatroom space. At the discursive level, we look at how the chatroom interaction is being constructed, distributed and interpreted, paying particular attention to the moves made by lecturers to steer the conversation in particular ways to achieve the aims of the lesson. Here we pay attention to the genres, rules of engagement and also 'force', which Fairclough (1992) describes as the 'actional component' of the text. At the level of social practice, we explore to what extent the chat interactions reproduce or redefine dominant face-to-face classroom structures, ideologies and practices.

To bolster the social analysis, we draw on Thompson's (1990) 'modes of ideology', which provides a valuable framework to make apparent the hidden assumptions and asymmetries of power in the text. Thompson states:

> The social location of individuals, and the entitlements associated with their positions in a social field or institution, endow them with varying degrees of 'power', understood at this level as a socially or institutionally endowed capacity which enables or empowers some individuals to make decisions, pursue ends or realise interests. (1990: 59).

The classroom space is far from neutral, and Thompson's conceptual tools of legitimation, unification, and reification in particular can be valuable in understanding how the chatroom space gets endowed with particular educational functions in the context of remote teaching.

4. Social uses of the chatroom as a boundary object

Vignette 1

The session on 19 Aug 2020 aimed to discuss a TED Talk by Chimamanda Adichie (2009) that students watched beforehand, titled, *The danger of a single story*. The session went on to relate this TED Talk to the single stories constructed about refugees in a discussion about what happens to the identity of individuals as they move across borders (see Appendix 1).

> **Lebo** 19 Aug 2020 10:00:08[1]
>
> Good morning.
>
> **Sumayya** 19 Aug 2020 10:00:08
>
> Good Morning
>
> **Jamie** 19 Aug 2020 10:00:15
>
> Good morning
>
> **Naomi** 19 Aug 2020 10:00:17
>
> Good morning

---

1   All participants have been given pseudonyms

The session started with students greeting 'Good morning', which is unlike a traditional classroom in the academy, where students would not normally greet – this might be the case for a lecturer. The greetings in fact serve to indicate their presence for the session, as a proxy for attendance in the absence of registers. This is different from the lecturers' greeting 'Good morning', which signals that class is about to commence.

4.1 Legitimising the chatroom as a classroom

After waiting a few minutes, the lecturer initiated the lesson by outlining its focus.

> 1. **Lecturer 1** 19 Aug 2020 10:02:20
>
> 2. Today, Lecturer 2 and I will be facilitating the session. We will unpack
>
> 3. Chimamanda Adichie's *The danger of the single story*.

With this announcement, one notes a shift from a social to an academic focus. The lecturer's instruction (LI) sets expectations for the session. The naming of lecturers gives them presence in a text-mediated space. In terms of discursive practice, the formal tone establishes the teacher-student hierarchy also characteristic of face-to-face teaching environments. This utterance serves to 'legitimise' (Thompson, 1990) the chatroom as a classroom space. The force of the statement, which Fairclough (1992) defines as the 'actional component', is evident in the way it structures the session in terms of a sense-making exercise, and the nature of interactions to follow.

The students continued to join after this announcement by greeting 'Good morning'. This prompted Lecturer 2 to suggest, "Let's wait a bit for others to join". The suggestion to pause signals the lecturer's sensitivity to students' connectivity issues, which are compounded in the social distancing context, where not all students have access to the internet. Thus, the boundary object is appropriated to infuse the classroom discourse with an ethics-of-care approach (Samson *et al.*, 2018), which legitimises it further in the context of the pandemic, as it complements the formal discourse with social awareness.

4.2 Promoting inclusive engagement

After a few minutes of lecturer silence punctuated by greetings, the academic session resumed at 10:07.

> 14. **Lecturer 1** 19 Aug 2020 10:07:13
>
> 15. Let us unpack the title: The danger of the single story. What do each of these
>
> 16. words signal to us?
>
> 17. We will now ask everyone in the room to jot down their thoughts in the text
>
> 18. box …

The LI "Let us unpack the title …" was followed by the lecturer's question (LQ) "What do each of these words signal to us?" The lecturer invited input from all students through the use of 'us'. The LQ is reinforced through LI "We will now ask everyone in the room to jot down their thoughts". This reinforcement highlights that the LQ is not simply something to ponder about. The use of the pronoun 'everyone' aims for 'unification' (Thompson: 1990) to encourage all to respond. The social practice in the online chatroom differed starkly from the face-to-face class

where synchronous responses from the entire class would lead to a cacophony of responses. The online space allowed for far more views to be posted and viewed in the sequence that they were posted, therefore enabling greater representation, especially in a context of remote teaching and learning, and more students' voices to be visibilised through their writing. A minute later at 10:08:56, students' responses (SR) started appearing on the screen. Given that the SRs need to be typed before being posted by students, one cannot necessarily compare the pace of online entries to the spontaneity of turns that are not text-mediated.

While the pace of turn-taking may be relatively slower, as mentioned, the frequency of SRs tends to be higher when compared to face-to-face classes, with the added benefit that statements can be reviewed post the lecture. The academic literacy practices in the online chatroom are therefore not time-bound, due to their accessibility beyond lecture times. In pandemic times, this affordance not only allowed for a more immersive literacy experience, but also a more inclusive one. It alters the rules of engagement with discussions on academic concepts and writing becoming available asynchronously for students with limited connectivity during the day.

4.3 Activating a particular disposition: the 'analytical mode'

Once students had jotted down responses to the broad question about the title, the lecturer re-entered the conversation floor three minutes later to ask a probing question (LQ):

> **Lecturer 1** 19 Aug 2020 10:10:21
>
> @Nancy and Joy, what makes one story the 'only' story?

We note here a clustering of responses to two students, and an LQ that invites them to interrogate how a story comes to be dominant, and how power plays a part in reifying one story and silencing others. This is a higher-order question that moves the expectation from description to analysis, requiring of students to offer an explanation, and hence to activate the 'analytical mode', which we define as a critical thinking mode where students can rehearse various possibilities in a low stakes environment without being held accountable for those views. The equivalence of inverted commas in the face-to-face classroom would be the encircling or underlining of the word 'only' on the board, accompanied by a particular tone of voice, facial expression or hand gesture for emphasis. The absence of classroom props and extra-verbal cues online compel lecturers to use punctuation and at times capitalisation to place emphasis on particular words and scaffold students' critical engagement.

The SR that followed was is from another student, Naomi, who responded to the first LQ about what the title signals to us. Thereafter Nancy and Joy each responded to the second LQ.

> 45. **Naomi** 19 Aug 2020 10:10:56
>
> 46. It's also dangerous because it is the one that is most commonly shared,
>
> 47. therefore, allowing prejudices, misconceptions and stereotypes to live on
>
> 48. **Nancy** 19 Aug 2020 10:11:30
>
> 49. @Lecturer 1 I think when it is the dominant narrative, to the exclusion of others
>
> 50. **Joy** 19 Aug 2020 10:11:37

51. It's the most popular story because the group telling it has the means to share

52. it, whether that be through media, common language, whatever.

53. **Maha** 19 Aug 2020 10:12:42

54. Morning everyone :) sorry im a bit late

Nancy restated that the only story is the dominant story and its consequences, without responding to how it became the dominant story. Jody however, did respond to the question by alluding to those in power dictating what should be *the* story. The lecturer did not interrupt or single out responses that are inadequate, but rather offered students free reign to experiment as a collective to add to and enhance one another's views. In terms of positioning, her effacement from the conversation was deliberate to allow the analytical mode to continue unhindered.

At this point, Maha who had just entered the chatroom, greeted the class and apologised for being late. The smiley emoticon mirrors the interaction in text messages, and serves here to invoke a pleasant reaction from the lecturers. In the physical classroom, she would make eye contact with the lecturer and quietly take her seat without interrupting the class. The lecturers did not respond to the greeting, as it merely served to mark presence. Due to her lateness, Maha possibly misread the rules of engagement in the chatroom, not realising that the academic part of the interaction was well underway. The lecturers' silence could be viewed as part of the regulative discourse to maintain the class's focus on conceptual engagement around what makes one story the dominant one. This is a critical step to reimagine alternatives to the single story, and for the purposes of answering the central question, to begin to formulate how the single story can have a negative impact on identity.

4.4 Reinforcing conceptual understanding

At key moments in the scaffolding process in the online class, students require feedback on their grasp of concepts, which could in turn play an integral part in the crafting of their academic argument.

The conversation above was followed by Noreen who responded to the first and second LQ by highlighting that single stories have consequences, and the fact that the single story comes from stereotypes. This second part reads like a tautology, as stereotypes are single stories as well. The question is how they came to become single stories or stereotypes.

At 10:13:03 the lecturer responded as follows:

58. **Lecturer 1** 19 Aug 2020 10:13:03

59. You are all making good points here. The danger signals the consequences of

60. the single story ... The single story silences other stories, creates stereotypes

61. about a group of people, and treats them as homogeneous.

Here the lecturer stepped back to respond to SRs on the first LQ about what the title signifies. She started by offering general feedback, "You are all making good points here". She then elaborated on what they answered well, which also served to reinforce the good points being made. She added a point about stereotypes making people treat others as a homogeneous grouping. Therefore, the LR serves as both a reinforcement and teaching moment.

Bomani then responded to the second LQ by rightly stating that those in power make one story the definitive story. Lebo added to it, but in response to Joy's point. We thus see turn-taking not only between lecturers and students, but also among students themselves, which signals that the online space is able to create a more networked interaction. This subverts the traditional format of the classroom and the discursive practice in terms of rules of engagement, challenging the expectation that ideas can only be legitimised by the lecturer.

The lecturer's response to Bomani reinforced his point:

70. **Lecturer 1** 19 Aug 2020 10:15:07

71. @Bomani, excellent point. The storyteller with power dictates the 'legitimate'

72. version of the story that puts him in a good light and diminishes the power of

73. those represented. Do the represented have any say in the story being told of

74. them?

She included a question about the platform available to those represented in the single story to influence what is told about them. This is a rhetorical question, aimed at getting students to think about who owns the story and how the single story silences those represented in it to tell their own story. Rhetorical questions, as used by the lecturer, are also welcomed in students' academic essays at the discursive level to generate interest and establish rapport with the reader at the outset, as a precursor to students debating the meanings and applications of concepts later to bolster their argument.

4.5 Looping back on concepts and autobiographies

To transition from abstract formulations to everyday experiences and allow for examples, the LQ that followed elicited a reflection on how the 'single story' relates to migrants.

75. What are some of the single stories about migrants?

Here students needed to view their social reality, what they had witnessed or even experienced, through the lens of Adichie's concept and reflect on its relevance and reach in their context. In the context of the pandemic, where remote teaching may aggravate students' sense of alienation from the academy, making theory real and anchoring it in students' experiences through the LBM may allow students to see themselves in the curriculum and have more presence and leverage in how they "take hold of literacy" (Kulick & Stroud, 1993) to make sense of their day-to-day lives. The LBM can thus aid with reifying their experiences as meaningful moments in the acquisition of academic knowledge.

The following SRs relied on single stories that the media and society often perpetuate about migrants stealing jobs, being poor and uneducated. Having listed to the single stories surrounding migrants, the next logical step would be to reflect on the dangers of those stereotypes. The list will allow students to draw parallels between the stereotypes presented by Adichie, and those that they have been fed and have possibly internalised. Thus, Bomani shared:

80. **Bomani** 19 Aug 2020 10:17:32

81. Most of the time, the represented have no say in the story that is being told

82. about them. Instead, they sometimes believe in the stories that were told about

83. them. The single story is dangerous because as Chimamanda said "You show

84. people as one thing over and over again and that is what they'll become"

This is an interesting juncture in the course in terms of students' conscientisation about how the single story gets internalised by 'us' and the' other', and social ills that stem from these single stories such as prejudice, discrimination, xenophobic sentiments and actions. This moment in the course also presented an opportunity to review the link between the textual and social practices (Fairclough, 1992), and therefore, one's responsibility as a writer not to perpetuate the injustices through an uncritical rendition of the story of the 'other' in academic prose.

4.6 Fostering productive discomfort

It is not surprising that the next LQ revolved around 'Who might be perpetuating such representations about the migrants? Somewhere, this question was also addressed to everyone in the chatroom in terms of how they may be complicit in reinforcing stereotypes about migrants. The next question, 'Are these stereotypes untrue?' returned to the course concepts. The oscillation mirrors the moves that students could make in their essays from the abstract to the concrete and back. The combined questions interrogated the scripts about self and other that have become 'naturalised' (Thompson, 1990) and entrenched in our psyche. Such questions operate at the level of 'social practice' and can trigger discomfort as one becomes aware of one's own biases in the promulgation of dominant and possibly problematic ideologies. However, we argue that the act of writing can recalibrate those views, operating as a confessional (Foucault, 1983; 1984; 1990; Hunma *et al.*, 2019), whereby students not only acknowledge their biases but rewrite themselves into being by considering alternative standpoints. This then reflects the LBM on the course as students revisit their lived experiences when exposed to new or different perspectives in the chatroom interaction.

Initially, the SRs by Carla and Nina continued to expand upon the single stories told about migrants. Since these are longer responses, it is likely that they were typed before the LQ on lines 91-92. As such, when analysing turn-taking on the online platform, it is important to remind ourselves of the time lag between LQ and SR with the possibility for alternating pairs (LQ2 SR1 LQ3 SR2 SR3) and overlaps (LQ2 SR1 SR2). The messiness of individual pairs, however, gains more coherence when one steps back to view the entire session. Later, Sumayya shared her views on the helplessness of the 'other' to rectify to the single story told of them, and Chloe shared her response to the LQ about who might be perpetuating single stories about migrants:

113. **Sumayya** 19 Aug 2020 10:19:23

114. @Lecturer 1 – In some cases the represented are unable to defend

115. themselves against the story that is being told. It is as if they are forced

116. to take up a part of their identity that is not true or incomplete. For

117. example, migrants who are represented as poor, unintelligent and

118. who steal jobs and opportunities. These are single stories that make

119. up migrants and thus a negative connotation is added to the word

120. "migrants."

121. **Chloe** 19 Aug 2020 10:19:28

122. I think the media has a big role in the creation of these stereotypes

These are meaningful realisations, which could in future make students more wary of the stereotypes that they are exposed to, and how to challenge them. The discomforting moments that ensued had to be addressed carefully through an ethics of care. If unresolved, they can cause harm by prolonging students' emotional distress and confusion. Therefore, Zembylas (2017) recommends,

> the reconceptualization of caring teaching highlights the value of *critical* and *strategic* pedagogical responses to students, not in the sense of annulling violence altogether (because that would be impossible), but in terms of minimising ethical violence and expanding relationality with vulnerable others.

While the communal chatroom space allows for relationality, or what Thompson (1990) would refer to as a process of 'unification', with peers experiencing similar discomfort, we argue that the onus is also on the lecturer-facilitator to guide the classroom discourse in ways that make the discomfort productive. By productive, we mean that students have room to consider various perspectives, interrogate their views without feeling compelled to eschew them, and share realisations without feeling judged.

We argue that when discomfort becomes productive, it allows for the teaching and learning moment to be transformative. For its realisation, the lecturers need to hold back from offering answers, which might be taken for the gospel, and rather pose questions or make observations about concepts and their application in real life. Thus, central to realising the pedagogy of discomfort is the LBM strategy. To describe how the LBM operates within this pedagogy, one can draw on the kite imagery, where facilitators need to manoeuvre the conversation string in different ways, at times reeling the conversation in to bring the focus back to course concepts, and at times, releasing more string to allow students to explain, analyse and apply those concepts in creative and expansive ways. This is a tricky balance to strike, as premature reeling in can lead to tangles where students are caught in conceptual confusion, but excessive release can lead to losing sight of the kite itself, where the conversation becomes intractable. The timely reeling in and releasing are central to calibrating discomforting moments in the classroom productively.

The moment of reeling in is visible in the lecturer's statement:

Lecturer 2 19 Aug 2020 10:19:07

All the comments above have merit and begin to unpack the title of Adichie's talk in a complex way. I think important for our discussion is the issue of "the danger". So we have to unpack how "the danger" finds expression in social life. From what I have read thus far, it seems that we are now starting to unpack "the danger".

The LR reminded students that single stories have consequences and focused their attention on "the danger" in the title *The dangers of the single story*. It starts by acknowledging the merit and complexity of students' responses, but refrains from offering a definitive answer. Rather, the lecturer asked students to unpack the concept of "the danger" more. The pronoun 'we' paves the way for 'relationality' due to the multiplicity of responses, which can in turn help to minimise the 'ethical violence' in the chatroom space by eliciting collective sentiments (Zembylas, 2017).

The format flouts the traditional initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) discursive practice in the classroom by highlighting the co-construction of meaning. The lecturer here is not a questioner or judge, but rather one scaffolding and deepening students' process of sense-making, at times guiding the classroom discussion by taking the cue from their statements. The use of hedging, 'it seems', offers students the possibility to own their conceptual journey. In this class, the facilitator approached the pedagogy of discomfort in a transformative way by delaying students' process of opinion-making and offering them time to reflect on their ideas in relation to others' (peers and theorists') ideas first. The chatroom as a boundary object therefore suspends the singularity of views by asking students to grapple with multiplicity, which while being discomforting, can enhance the understanding of ourselves and the 'other' on the social front, but also on the page, as one carefully threads one's voice alongside other voices in one's essay.

Vignette 2

The second vignette is extracted from chatroom interactions two months later, on 15 October 2020, when students applied the course concepts to the case of a refugee who had been interviewed by us, in order to craft their research essay. The session began with a recapitulation and then revisited concepts in light of the case.

4.7 Synthesising ideas

The session began with the lecturer synthesising ideas from the previous week. The summary of ideas is characteristic of face-to-face classrooms as well, where the lecturer or students share the essential points discussed before to draw links with what is to follow. However, the chatroom keeps a record of all interactions, unlike the face-to-face classroom. In terms of discursive practice, summaries may seem unidirectional and didactic; however, this presents an opportunity for students to recollect, pose questions, clarify any misreading and add to the summary if need be. After the customary greetings, the session began at 10:04.

> 152. **Lecturer 1** 15 Oct 2020 10:04:39
>
> 153. In the past week, we have been having animated discussions about the research
>
> 154. story. We will start today's session by summarising some of the main ideas that
>
> 155. came up.
>
> 156. Insights from the research story exercise:
>
> 157. - The single story that we hold about migrants is often fed to us by the media
>
> 158. through subliminal messaging. It is a construction reinforced repeatedly until it
>
> 159. seems 'real'.

160. - The single stories can also be a product of ideas shared by our family and the

161. immediate surrounding.

162. - The racial ideas embedded in those constructions may also be a product of our

163. colonial legacies.

164. - Disentangling the different lenses through which we come to see ourselves and

165. the other on the continent may require new constructions of African identities,

166. that do not fall prey to new single stories e.g. the nativistic view.

167. - Therefore, single stories do not operate in a vacuum. They are a product of

168. social structures and the dominant discourses that prevail at a given point in

169. time.

170. - We appropriate the single stories (make them our own) in order to make sense

171. of the world, where we belong, who to trust, who are our own and who are

172. 'other'.

173. However these single stories come with consequences in terms of how we relate

174. with those that are constructed as different, as threats…

175. - The single story can become a way of policing boundaries and justifying acts of

176. xenophobia and xenoracism.

177. - Migrants may also hold certain single stories about the host nation and its

178. people. While they seek to assimilate and adopt the norms of the host nation,

179. they may also pose a threat to how the locals identify themselves.

180. - The process of writing the research story allows us to sift through the chaff and

181. nail down what is essential. It can also trigger a series of new questions.

182. - The research story also makes us aware of shifts in our thinking, ideas that we

183. need to forego. The final part allows us to distil an argument – stabilised for now.

184. - In terms of boundaries, in the process of barricading ourselves from the other,

185. from the unknown, we may end up also caging ourselves. The challenging of the

186. single story reminds us of Adichie's point about 'regaining a kind of paradise'.

187. **Lebo** 15 Oct 2020 10:07:17

188. Morning.

189. **Lecturer 1** 15 Oct 2020 10:07:19

190. We will give you some time to read through it. Then we will have a discussion.

The pause gave students time to read, but also time to recall and contemplate. This is a good reminder that engagement also necessitates moments of silence to grapple with ideas. As aptly put by Truman Fisher, "The pause is as important as the note" (Stith, 2017). The key points listed were generated by lecturers and students in the previous week; therefore this summary was carefully crafted to bring some coherence to the multiplicity of views shared, with the aim of activating the LBM in the current session. However, care was taken not to 'centre' one view as the only view, and that explains why the summary was followed by a discussion to question the meanings that had temporarily been stabilised. Thus, the act of synthesising is not antithetical to that of activating the analytical mode; rather, the synthesised content becomes a launchpad for newer enquiries, which in turn lend themselves to more complex processes of drafting and refining.

4.8 Applying to case studies

Another layer of literacy practice on the course involves applying the temporarily stabilised meanings to a case to explore the extent to which they would find relevance in real-life examples. The face-to-face classroom would sometimes be used for application, and this would involve complicating and destabilising singular views. In the online chatroom, we noted how the questioning process got students to re-engage with abstract concepts in relation to the refugee's case and answer the central question of 'What happens to identity when people cross borders?' Earlier in the semester, students responded to this question by drawing on examples from their autobiography. This time however, they were responding to the same question by analysing the case of a refugee they had never met. As they entered this uncharted terrain, they were again required to put their grasp of concepts to the test.

> 193. **Lecturer 2** 15 Oct 2020 10:07:27
>
> 194. The idea of "regaining a kind of paradise" is interesting as it does suggest the
>
> 195. opposite as well, "losing a kind of paradise". They both are interesting concepts
>
> 196. that could be included in our conceptual toolkit as we write and revisit the
>
> 197. question that underpins our interactions in this class. Both, it seems require
>
> 198. some effort or active engagement of some sort. I think for us it is important to
>
> 199. consider
>
> 200. - in the context of this course where we are concerned with the constructions of
>
> 201. identities of the refugee vs that of citizen of the host country - what constitutes
>
> 202. (a) "losing a kind of paradise" and (b) "regaining a kind of paradise". Again (a) and
>
> 203. (b) seem to suggest active engagement on the part of the individual.
>
> 204. So, if we consider our research stories then i think the definition of (a) and (b)
>
> 205. might be located in these stories. These definitions might differ or have
>
> 206. similarities if we compare the research stories written in this class. Perhaps it
>
> 207. would be worth our while to spend some time considering what constitutes (a)

208. and (b) in our individual stories.

209. I think we would ALL benefit if there is someone here who can share what they

210. think constitutes (a) and (b) in their research stories. By doing this we can

211. perhaps see how we can include some concepts as a means to expand and

212. enrich the writing. Ok, any volunteers?

In this instance, the lecturer began with a quote from the Adichie TED Talk, that when we acknowledge multiple stories, "we regain a kind of paradise". The regaining of a kind of paradise presupposes that the paradise has been previously lost. The lecturer asked students to share how 'losing a kind of paradise' and 'regaining a kind of paradise' would apply in the construction of refugees' and citizens' identities. The implication here is that the citizens and refugees' identities are relational, and that both experience some degree of loss and redemption when borders are crossed. The exercise required of the students to go through the research stories that they had been crafting to identify those two moments. Generally, in a research project, this exercise would be part of the data analysis and discussion. It is worth noting that the analysis and discussion are very focused, requiring of students to apply two particular concepts. Students can then experiment with a similar approach when applying other concepts to their data.

Jamie responded with a litany of questions:

213. **Jamie** 15 Oct 2020 10:10:55

214. By losing a kind of paradise, would the example of Kongo prevail? Where upon

215. immigrating he lost certain freedoms? Freedom to study, to further educate

216. himself initially, freedom to work?

217. By gaining a certain paradise, could that be understood as one's means of

218. adapting to the culture one is immersed within? Or even, it could be correlated

219. to the notion of "the grass is greener" on the other side? Whereby people often

220. cross boarders in search of asylum or due to the pre convinced [sic] notions and

221. ideas they hold of other countries. Therefore, by crossing borders they gain

222. some form of paradise?

These questions suggest that Jamie still operated within the analytical mode mentioned above, considering various possibilities and not seeking to stabilise one answer as the definitive one. Her moves highlight how data analysis and discussion are often constructions, starting with a series of speculations to be narrowed down by the data. She thus used the chatroom for application in a fluid way that is still open to contestation. In terms of discursive practice, this questioning style is quite unusual in the classroom and does not follow the conventional IRE format. Usually, students pose questions to the lecturer, but here the questioning indexes that she was grappling with those concepts. Her questioning style in fact mirrors more the Socratic approach (see also Salvi, 2020; Simpson, 2020 on criticality) used by lecturers as part of the

LBM than the way students engage with ideas in class. It could be that over time, Jamie had internalised the Socratic approach to pose questions to herself.

The lecturer responded by offering conceptual clarification rather than offering an answer. That would allow the student to refine her application of the concept.

228. **Lecturer 2** 15 Oct 2020 10:16:26

229. So Jamie the (b) you are referring to seems to suggest 'a gain' and not a 'regaining'.

230. The latter suggests a reclaiming and not a claiming. So there is a difference.

231. Adichie seems to suggest that we regain a kind of paradise, which means it was

232. lost but now reclaimed. I think we need to apply our minds to that and how (a)

233. and (b) link with ID constructions of both refugee and citizen.

By homing in on the intricacies of the question, the fact that it is a 'regaining' rather than a 'gaining', the lecturer nudged the student to revise her application. Since her previous response had focused on the refugee alone, the lecturer asked that the class reflect on the implication of border crossing on the citizen's identity as well. Case application thus enables feedback on how concepts can be animated and interrogated through real life examples, but also on how these complex links can be explored in academic prose. The iterative process of stabilising and destabilising conceptual understandings is also part of the LBM, which could culminate in students comparing their experiences of border crossing as an insider or outsider, with that of the refugee.

It is noteworthy that the lecturer did not address the second part of his feedback directly to Jamie, but rather to the class, "I think we need to apply our minds to that". In that way, the student concerned was not intimidated. The discomfort was shared among the collective, and the students were offered a way forward with regard to the application. In terms of discursive practice, we note a careful use of pronouns in the chatroom so that the lecturer's statements can be interpreted as not singling students out, but benefiting all, such that the 'boundary object' becomes inclusive in a remote teaching context and turns one-on-one feedback into an opportunity for formative feedback to all.

By drawing on one student's draft in the online class, other students might also be urged to revisit their drafts. The use of the third person plural pronoun 'we' could be seen as a unifying move. It elicits the collective process of reflection, and demonstrates through one student's case application in the chatroom, various possibilities for sense-making across the class.

5. Conclusion

Essentially, the social uses of the online chatroom discussed above exemplify a specific response to the call made to the academic community during the pandemic to ensure that the educational project is not compromised. While the obvious response was to migrate the classroom online, the less obvious one was how to do so in ways that would not further alienate those who were already socio-academically marginalised. In other words, it was important to ensure that self-isolation did not further entrench academic divides. Therefore, we opted to conduct our daily classes in the chatroom on our LMS, a zero-rated option that could be endowed with more functions, without excluding particular students.

In this paper, we explored the social uses of the chatroom as a boundary object, a site encoded with particular meanings and functions in order to realise the LBM on the academic literacy course. The LBM is a strategy within our pedagogy of discomfort to invite students to link course concepts to previous social science concepts and their autobiography. Through privileging the written mode in the chatroom, the boundary object became a rehearsal space for students to experiment with ideas and styles in writing from the very first day of class in the ERT mode. We analysed the various uses of the chatroom in two vignettes, one at the start of the semester and the other towards the end. We used Fairclough's (1992) critical discourse analysis framework and Thompson's (1990) modes of ideology to revisit how the chatroom gets harnessed as a 'boundary object' (Bowker & Star, 2000) to mediate the acquisition of academic literacy in a context of remote teaching. The chatroom turns were analysed in terms of textual, discursive and social practices to highlight not only the utterances on the screen and the rules of engagement, but also the social uses of the chatroom space to promote a particular academic literacy pedagogy, which cannot be enacted outside of students' experiences and social context.

What emerged from the analysis is the use of the chatroom as a proxy for the classroom that promotes inclusive engagement, activates the analytical mode, enables conceptual reinforcement through the LBM of the course, fosters discomfort as productive, and allows for synthesis and case application. Some of these social uses may be replicating the face-to-face classroom, but others are novel uses made possible due to the affordances of the online space. Some of the novel uses are the possibility for more interaction due to the boundary object's ability to hold synchronous postings; the possibility for networked engagement where students can interact with one another, not just with the lecturer; the possibility to review previous weeks' statements saved as transcripts for the purpose of synthesising and deepening engagement. These new uses serve as a reminder that technological tools are 'functionally blank' and can be appropriated creatively to fulfil the course objectives, especially at present, with the normalising of the online teaching modality at residential universities. They also prompt us to reconsider face-to-face classroom interactions in a post-pandemic context, and identify moments that call for blended learning to leverage the benefits of both.

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