AUTHOR:
Linda Sparks[1]
Louri Louw[1]

AFFILIATION:
[1]University of the Free State, South Africa

Ubuntu in the academic literacy class: Establishing a sense of community for inclusivity and effective learning

Abstract

Research conducted on online learning during the height of Covid-19 showed that a sense of community is integral to creating a conducive learning environment. This has influenced current perspectives on teaching practice and learning climate for face-to-face teaching as is the case in this study, whilst also being applicable to blended and online environments. Thus, reflection on how to improve teaching during the pandemic by engaging in students' sense of community has transformed teaching practice until the present day. From an African perspective this is noteworthy, as it simulates an environment where Ubuntu *is possible. This is true for academic literacy (AL) classes on an access programme where a social constructivist approach is followed. Social constructivism enhances participation and learning by fostering peer-to-peer relationships and teacher-to-peer relationships. For instance, students are motivated to share ideas and responsibility through peer or groupwork, as well as through teacher guidance and feedback. Thus, grounded in shared power and respect, a community underpinned by* Ubuntu – "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1989: 106) – is ideally created. Through assessing students' perceptions of the AL classroom environment through quantitative and qualitative data, this study investigates whether a sense of* Ubuntu *and inclusivity is present and whether this assists in improving AL skills. Findings show positive results, implying that the teaching and learning of AL are improved if a sense of community and* Ubuntu *is established in the classroom. Therefore, the study aims to improve AL skills by ensuring that students feel a sense of community and* Ubuntu *in the classroom and to recognise students' diversity through inclusivity. This aids learning in the AL class through socially just teaching practices, which will ultimately assist in student success at university.*

Keywords: *academic literacy, social constructivism, social justice, Ubuntu*

1. Introduction

Though Covid-19 brought disaster to the world in almost all possible ways, it also transformed teaching as we know it; in this case, it brought about much reflection in academic

literacy (AL) classes on an access programme. Interesting results were encountered through reflection on student engagement strategies in an online classroom which focused on a social constructivist approach. One such avenue stumbled upon by chance was that social constructivism in the online arena provides students with an empowering voice – to the extent that the approach touches on the philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Most importantly and crucial to this research is that this approach could be applied not only during Covid-19 to online classes, but also to blended and face-to-face classes, which became the norm in 2022.

Essentially, social constructivism bears a profound similarity to the philosophy of *Ubuntu*. This, therefore, is a point of interest for teachers attempting to provide a safe, interactive environment for students of academic literacy in Southern Africa. For example, Makalela (2018: 840) describes *Ubuntu* in the classroom as beneficial in the sense that it stimulates a sense of community and the valorisation of co-learning between teachers and learners. Similarly, social constructivism is based on the idea that "human development is socially situated and knowledge is constructed through interaction with others" (McKinley, 2015: 185). Indeed, Schreiber and Tomm-Bonde (2015) highlight the significant similarity between *Ubuntu* and constructivist theory as a way of addressing social injustice and power imbalances, and seeking equality, especially from an Afrocentric perspective. As classes in 2022 once again moved to the brick-and-mortar classroom, the opportunity arose to explore this concept further. What had been learned during Covid-19 and the online world of classroom interaction with a social constructivist approach could then be likened to *Ubuntu*. Furthermore, research could be conducted as to whether an environment of this kind – one where everyone works together to achieve a common goal, in this instance, acquiring AL skills – is conducive to the AL classroom.

2.   Background to the study

The study was conducted during the first semester of 2022 on an access programme for Higher Certificate Economic and Management Science (EMS) and Humanities students. The time is relevant, as this was the first time students returned to campus following the outbreak of Covid-19. Since academic literacy (AL) classes had functioned in a completely online environment in 2020 and 2021, the researchers identified an opportunity to explore classroom interactions in 2022 based on findings from their previous research, which showed that there may be an environment of *Ubuntu* in AL classes that follow a community-centred and social constructivist approach. Strategies in the online environment were shown to improve this feeling of harmony and *Ubuntu*. Thus, applying this to face-to-face classes, as well as blended/online classes as the need arose for improved learning is of special interest. In addition, the cohort of students chosen for this study, through previous research, were found to have greater success when community-centredness and social justice formed part of the teaching methodology. This is because students on this specific access programme, and in general in AL programmes across South Africa, require much support in gaining the academic, language, reading and writing skills needed for success at university. Dison (2018: 71) reiterates this point, stating that the "schooling system in South Africa is extremely poor and even students from better-resourced schools often struggle to master the academic literacies required at university". Students enrolled in this programme are predominantly first-generation, English Second Language (ESL) learners who mainly originate from rural areas where schooling may not have been advantageous to higher education. Students would mainly have received education at schools between quintiles 1 and 3, meaning that they tend to find themselves completely underprepared on the steps of tertiary education (Bezuidenhout *et al.*, 2011), though they are often unaware of this fact.

Students on this access programme also have not obtained the required academic record to achieve university acceptance. The admission point for entry is between 18 and 24, which shows the level of scaffolding and extra support needed. Hence, there is a need within support subjects such as AL, for a caring and harmonious environment where students feel enough safety in the classroom to embrace learning, which is vastly different from high school. In these high schools, teachers are often not adequately trained, nor do they have the resources to assist students in acquiring the necessary AL or English language skills needed (Van Wyk, 2014: 207). They would mainly have been taught from a hierarchal, authoritative point of view, with rote learning, "repeating phrases and words", "chorus answers" and "copying notes from the board" comprising the essence of learning (Fleisch, 2008: 109). Suddenly being in an environment where expression in writing is required, along with similar academic writing conventions, is daunting, especially given that many students would have been operating in relative isolation when Covid-19 was at its worst. Thus, allowing for an environment of comfort and ease, to enhance learning and gradually build confidence through the approach of _Ubuntu_ became the focus of research in this study, especially as the philosophy aligned with social constructivist principles which had shown success and improvement in teaching during the pandemic. Similarly, applying social constructivism to teaching, when students are unfamiliar with its principles (such as background knowledge activation, peer learning, group interaction and discussion, learning from one another, and teacher and students working together), is much easier when students understand that the familiar concept of _Ubuntu_ is present in the classroom. Though this was only discovered later, introducing the concept to students who all seemed to know what the term means, allows them to happily embrace something with which they are familiar. This aligns with the sentiments of De Sousa, Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Soudien (2022), who believe it is essential to include indigenous knowledges from the Global South in higher education. In fact, further discussing how learning will occur using this approach prepares students for teaching and learning from which they might usually shy away.

3. Conceptual framework

The academic literacy (AL) classroom is quite a complex and dynamic realm comprising a multitude of culturally, economically and socially diverse individuals whose shared goal is to acquire AL skills. If not managed effectively, these differences could easily become social barriers which will most likely alienate students and consequently impede learning. This is not merely an AL classroom problem, as very few students who enter tertiary education are adequately prepared for this journey and will inevitably experience estrangement or alienation as a result. Mann (2001: 11) identifies this transition as a colonising process where:

> Most students entering the new world of the academy are in an equivalent position to those crossing the borders of a new country – they have to deal with the bureaucracy of checkpoints, or matriculation, they may have limited knowledge of the local language and customs, and are alone.

This is supported by Carolissen and Kiguwa (2018: 3), who affirm that most South African students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds experience alienation because of unequal histories, the language of instruction and power and knowledge, especially if these are of a colonial nature. Boughey and McKenna (2021) argue that in the South African higher education context, the low throughput of previously disadvantaged students is most likely the result of the decontextualised and thus socially unjust environment in which they find themselves.

Unfortunately this situation was exacerbated by Covid-19, as social distancing led to negative impacts on mental health, specifically causing alienation (Dhawan, 2020; Zhu *et al.*, 2021). Speiser and Speiser (2022) allude to a general loss of attachment to 'ourselves' and 'one another' because of the pandemic. A sense of belonging or community in the classroom could act as a counterpoint to the alienation experienced by many first-time students. Previous research remains consistent in showing that a sense of community in the classroom results in multiple positive outcomes (Battistich *et al*., 1997; Goehring & Whittington, 2017; Hausmann *et al*., 2009).

Although this study investigates a sense of community and *Ubuntu* in a face-to-face environment, it is important to reflect on how this idea came about as a reflection of online classes during the pandemic. In online classes, the role of community forms an integral part of student engagement, with Dixson (2010: 8) even suggesting that the online experience is "all about connections". Classroom community in an online space also received more attention during Covid-19 (Gay & Betts, 2020; Muir, Douglas & Trimble, 2020; Waghid, Meda & Chiroma, 2021). Therefore, this factor has resulted in investigating the role of community within the AL classes, whether, face-to-face, online or blended. For example, Battistich *et al*. (1997) found that a sense of community correlates positively with happiness, coping and academic self-efficacy, self-esteem, social skills, and motivation. These positive outcomes are further supported by Hausmann *et al*. (2009), who found that a sense of belonging may be a potential link to student perseverance and academic success. In addition, more recent studies have found that commitment to learning increases and behavioural disruptions decrease when students perceive a sense of community in the classroom (Barron & Kinney, 2021). Furthermore, Ghosh (2021) found that a positive cultural community in the classroom allowed students to share more readily and consistently. Clearly then, previous research shows how a sense of community in the classroom results in the achievement of crucial academic skills. Furthermore, achievement of academic skills is paramount to university success and thus an important motivator for this study (Van Rooy & Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2015: 42).

Keeping the above-mentioned in mind, a social constructivist approach is adopted on this access programme to speak to its specific context and complexity. The aim here is to harness a rich repository of knowledge from different individuals and to create a site of belonging which will mutually benefit everyone in the class. Watson (2001: 140) explains that learning through social constructivism is regarded as "a shared social activity, embedded in classroom interactions". Per definition, the learner depends on his/her peers to learn effectively. Van Wyk (2014: 210) elaborates, "students are socialised into academic discourse through their interaction with classmates, instructors and others in the academic context". In other words, the classroom becomes a "Burkean Parlour", and thus a site where collaborative efforts underpin the whole classroom experience (Lunsford, 1991: 9).

Carstens and Rambiritch (2020: 240) explain how social constructivism can also take on a political role, as students/writers are given the agency to contribute to social change, therefore promoting a socially just environment. In this kind of classroom, diversity and students' background knowledge are respected and built upon (Van Wyk, 2014). This notion of acceptance and belonging is underscored by Carolissen and Kiguwa (2018: 9), who call for a space that "embraces complex identities instead of singular unitary notions of belonging and identification". If this is so, then the pedagogy of *Ubuntu* should be an essential component within the teaching paradigm. Pinpointing the exact definition of *Ubuntu* remains elusive. However, the South African Government White Paper on Social Welfare of 1997 (Department of Welfare, 1997) provides a sound attempt:

> The principle of caring for each other's well-being will be promoted, and a spirit of mutual support fostered. Each individual's humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through a recognition of the individual's humanity. *Ubuntu* means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting societal well-being.

The very definition of *Ubuntu* portrays the individual as existing only because of his or her relation to others, "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'' (Mbiti, 1989: 106). This weighty philosophy starts with firstly recognising the individual. Only thereafter is the individual located within a community on which his or her very essence relies. This is supported by Speiser and Speiser (2022: 75), who recognise that *Ubuntu* nurtures both intrapersonal as well as interpersonal coherence and continuity. This recognition of the individual's relation to a community is essential, as students should therefore not alter who they are to be part of the community. Instead, the philosophy embraces a group of diverse individuals, who together are more effective in uplifting the individual than they would have been on their own. Speiser and Speiser (2022: 75) aptly state, "We are re-minding and re-bodying ourselves into a larger sense of togetherness deriving from an *Ubuntu* sense of community interdependence – a larger sense of belonging". Finally, this reliance on the community results in an assertion of the individual – *therefore I am* – showing the autonomy and independence of identity. As such, when applying this theory to a classroom, a site of inclusivity where individuals are respected and accepted predetermines academic success. Therefore, a sense of belonging within a group of learners increases stimulation and engagement with content, which will in turn help an individual to achieve academic goals. Ultimately, this respectful and uplifting community does not always occur naturally; rather, it is dictated by the social climate which is constructed by the educator. This approach links seamlessly with social constructivism. It also seems that social constructivism promotes community, at least, that is, theoretically (Schreiber & Tomm-Bonde, 2015). Hence, this study aims to ascertain if the educator's social constructivist approach is indeed creating a site of *Ubuntu* within the classroom, as well as assisting with success in AL.

4.   Methodology and data collection procedures

Ethical clearance was received to conduct this study. This study followed a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach in order to triangulate findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This method was selected so that the qualitative data could corroborate the quantitative research findings (Bryman *et al.*, 2014: 62). One of the researcher's three classes formed the sample for this study, and thus convenience sampling was used as a selection process. 61 out of the 90 students participated, thus allowing for a reliable sample size. Quantitative data were gathered using a questionnaire survey, namely an adapted form of the Classroom Sense of Community Scale by Petrillo, Capone and Donizzetti (2016). The questionnaires were administered using Questback, and students were given three weeks' completion time, as well as being assured of anonymity and confidentiality of responses. The questionnaire option was selected to avoid ambiguous answers and to limit responding time (Bryman *et al.*, 2018: 192). The study set out to investigate the alignment between social constructivism and students' perceptions of community and *Ubuntu*. This scale poses 30 questions, divided into four sub-headings, namely: sense of belonging and emotional connection with peers; satisfaction of needs and opportunities for involvement; support and emotional connection with the classroom peers and teachers; and support by peers and opportunities for influence (Petrillo *et al.*, 2016).

The scale was adapted to include the improvements that research suggests may increase a sense of belonging within the classroom. In addition, the survey was further adapted to accommodate South African ESL students learning on the programme. Thus additional questions were added, and the wording changed to make sure students understood everything as completely as possible. The survey also asked students to identify their gender as well as levels of introversion (preference to working alone within the class) and extraversion (preference to working with others). This was to assist with determining whether these factors affected a sense of community within the classroom and to form comparisons with previous studies.

Qualitative data were gathered through open-ended question, which related to the four above-mentioned sub-headings. Open-ended questions allowed for unusual answers, exploration of new areas and tapping into respondents' levels of knowledge and understanding (Bryman *et al*. 2014). For example, students were asked to "[d]escribe the sense of *Ubuntu* in your classroom". This provides assurance that students understood the concept of *Ubuntu* and thus increases the reliability of previous findings and this specific study. Students were also urged to provide examples of *Ubuntu* in the classroom. Finally, the results of the two methods were compared to ensure reliability and validity. A summary of the results and a discussion thereof follow.

5. Results and discussion

Based on the survey, a mainly positive response from students was received. A major focus in the analysis of results will also dwell on the rich data received from student comments. These comments show how students in the class felt a sense of harmony and loyalty to one another and their learning. The approach follows a philosophy of *Ubuntu,* which ties in with social constructivism, social justice and a sense of belonging to one's community, ultimately assisting in students feeling an enhanced learning environment for the betterment of themselves and others.

Of importance to the results is that 32% of the participants were male and 68% were female, making this cohort the majority female. Most students also identified themselves as enjoying working both alone and together (neither extroverted nor introverted), with 30% feeling that they preferred working together (extrovert) and only 16% stipulating that they would rather work alone (introvert). The words 'extrovert' and 'introvert' were given more to see how students were working in the class rather than for labelling purposes. Thus, the class, 84% of students, mostly felt comfortable working with others if it was needed, or they enjoyed working together.

Students' sense of belonging and emotional commitment to peers were the first category surveyed. Results in Figure 1 below show that almost 80% of students felt that there was respect for individuals in the classroom environment. This is one of the key constructs of both *Ubuntu* and social constructivism (Shreiber & Tomm-Bonde, 2015). In addition, most students felt that they belonged, that there was opportunity for participation and, importantly, that they felt comfortable in the classroom.
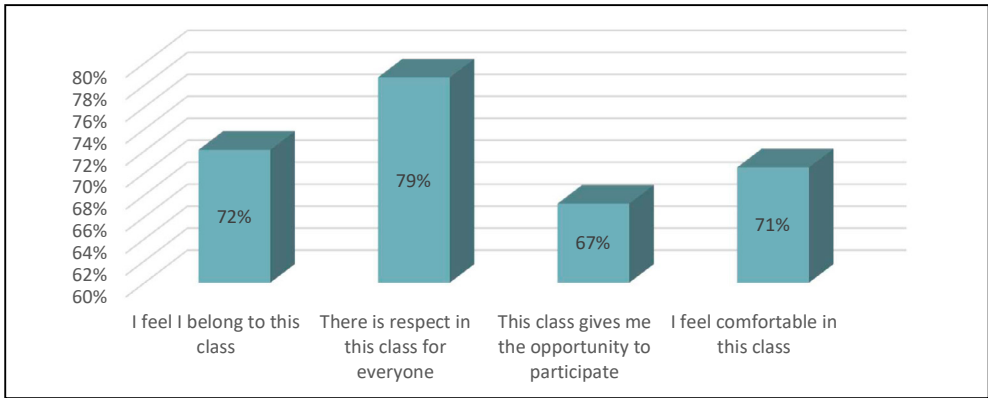
Figure 1: Student perception of belonging and emotional commitment to peers

Interestingly, out of those students who identified themselves as extroverts within the class atmosphere, 94% perceived a sense of belonging. This correlation shows that students who were at ease with practising the concept of *Ubuntu* are possibly more comfortable in the classroom environment, especially in being able to participate with others for greater learning. Therefore, this level of comfort could allow for potential increase in AL skills, as well as the motivation to build on these skills (Barron & Kinney, 2021; Battistich *et al*., 1997; Ghosh 2021; Hausmann, 2009). Similarly, 66% of those students who did not mind functioning either on their own or with fellow students felt comfortable in the class environment and a sense of belonging. However, students preferring to work alone did show more isolation, in that only 50% of them felt they belonged to the greater class community. Of further interest is that although there were fewer males in the class, 84% felt a greater sense of belonging than the 66% of females in the class.

Figure 2 below shows students' satisfaction with needs and opportunities for involvement, where most of the class felt that they could work with their fellow students in collaboration. Similar results are shown when it comes to working together and the willingness to help one another.
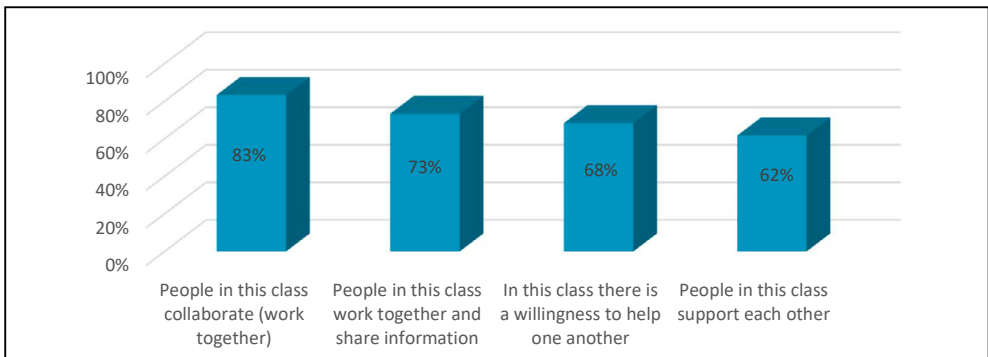

Figure 2: Student perceptions of satisfaction for needs and opportunities for involvement

These two areas of students' feeling of community in the class can also be seen in the comments from students in Table 1, in the first category: Sense of belonging/Opportunity for involvement. This provides evidence from students' views of the atmosphere perceived in a class where the approach of *Ubuntu* has been taken. Students' wording constantly points to 'love', 'respect', and a feeling of openness and understanding. Students thus felt safe and secure, which is of significance to success in learning AL skills, such as writing and critical thinking (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020: 241-242). In addition, students felt that they were helping one another to succeed and learning from one another. This ties in with Ghosh's (2021) findings about students' willingness to share knowledge more readily if they experience a sense of community. This means that students perceived harmony in the way they worked together and thus, possibly, a sense of *Ubuntu*. Furthermore, academic success may become a greater reality for students, especially if they have more self-efficacy, self-esteem, and coping and social skills (Battistich *et al*., 1997; Hausmann, 2009). Student engagement and exploration into the community of the classroom and beyond, as Dixson (2010) stipulates, is about connection. The last figure, Figure 7, reveals how students found *Ubuntu* within the class to be linked with respect, learning and harmony. These keywords summarise the major findings in Table 1 in which student perceptions are shown. It must be noted that students' comments have been left as they wrote them to preserve the authenticity of data.

Table 1: Students' perceptions (in their own words) of the different areas of community, *Ubuntu* and social constructivism in the classroom

1. Sense of belonging / Opportunity for involvement	2. Relationships with facilitator and peers	3. Opportunity for influence	4. A sense of Ubuntu in the class
• *Thi class is my home, I get love, respect and i enjoy to be there all the time.* • *... my peers are able extend grace and understanding when working and participation* • *I love the fact that we assist each other when we don't understand something.* • *My facilitator is always there for us whenever we need her. She always gives us advice on how to work at the outer level best.*	• *The relationship is Very good as we are always there for one another,we share information, we help one another not with ... module but in all the modules we are doing. We show each other love and appreciation.* • *We share a lot of information with my peers we are like siblings, we want each and everyone of us to do great.* • *I don't want my classmates left me behind, everything they wanna do, I wanna be included and interested. So thet we can understood each other and work together as a class.*	• *Our class prepares us for university and the work space* • *I feel honoured in the classroom* • *I get inspired whenever i stepped in* • *This class has taught me a lot about university life and adapt .Am now confident able take the stage without fear.* • *I feel more confident to ask or answer questions in class , and I am applying this skills that I have learned in GENL course to other modules*	• *I am because of my classmates without them I am nothing, n also they are because of me* • *Humanity is promoted in my classroom* • *My classmates and my facilitator are always willing to help if there's someone who does not understand something. There's sense of respect and understanding in the classroom,I feel this in how we speak to each other* • *We love each another Always*

1. Sense of belonging / Opportunity for involvement	2. Relationships with facilitator and peers	3. Opportunity for influence	4. A sense of Ubuntu in the class
• *My peer are very open. Am not afraid telling them my story because I trust them in way that they can solve my problems.* • *I feel secure in class, no one threatens me in anything we do in class.* • *In this class it not easy to left aside because students and Facilitator helps each ather* • *She encourage everyone to participate in class as it is a place for learning new skills and improve on them* • *No one is judge at when answering the questions.. I feel safe to ask if I do not understand* • *It helps increasing my self-esteem.* • *We all listen to each other in class when someone raise an opinion regarding certain matter in class* • *Our classroom is a safe space and our Facilitator taught us unity is key.*	• *I learn lot of academic skills from my peers or my classmates* • *Th is is a positive class. I've never seen someone left out.* • *It helps me to understand the module better and it improves my ability to write and read.* • *We are like brothers and sisters because we communicate alot and we also help each other* • *We are cool and working hard to get better marks but eish you guys also strict with marks sometimes.* • *We have a good relationship because ther is no judgement among us.* • *We really respect one another. We do not judge someone if they do not understand, instead we help them to understand the content better.* • *The lecture is kind. She wants us to do better in our studies.*	• *I love to work with other students because it is fun and I learn more* • *In our we feel that we are university students, sometimes we are not giving up. We focus as we wanna be successful in life.* • *I feel more confident to ask or answer questions in class , and I am applying this skills that I have learned in GENL course to other modules* • *It makes me to be familiar with the things that I am too spontaneous to them. Also makes me to know more knowledge.* • *I am able to do a lot of things by myself even if it's not related to this module. It also helps me to do most of the things by myself* • *It helps me gain more knowledge when it comes to academics* • *Achieve my academic reading and writing*	• *We do have Ubuntu cause we always help each other no one ever feels left out.* • *The is no discrimination even though we come from different cultures we respect each other race and rules.* • *We are a team, always there for each other* • *Our Facilitator does her best an she gets the same energy from us.* • *The sense of UBUNTU is practiced in my class because my peers and facilitator always help me* • *Awesome* • *We get along,we respect each other ,we are able to work with each other and most importantly we love each other.* • *My class is a good example of Ubuntu as we all work together and we are able to help those of us who are facing difficulties and we always there for each other at all times*

Results are similar for support and emotional connection with peers and teachers (Figure 3). Almost 80% of students perceived that they had the support of their facilitator. Support from peers is slightly lower, with 62% of students feeling comfortable asking for their peers' assistance. Judging from the student comments in Table 1, in the second category, though, it is possible to see a wide array of student experiences as being that of sharing the similar goal of learning, not leaving others behind and, very importantly, learning academic skills from

classmates. This last comment conveys how the learning environment is one of connection, whilst learning is still taking place. Words such as "siblings" and "brothers and sisters" frequently appear in the data, suggesting that there is a spirit of camaraderie. This may indicate students' perceptions of the "safe space", so vital for a social constructivist learning process (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020: 241-242). Keywords in Figure 7 also emphasise this aspect. For example, the mention of a safe, inclusive and secure environment was mentioned 39 times in qualitative data.
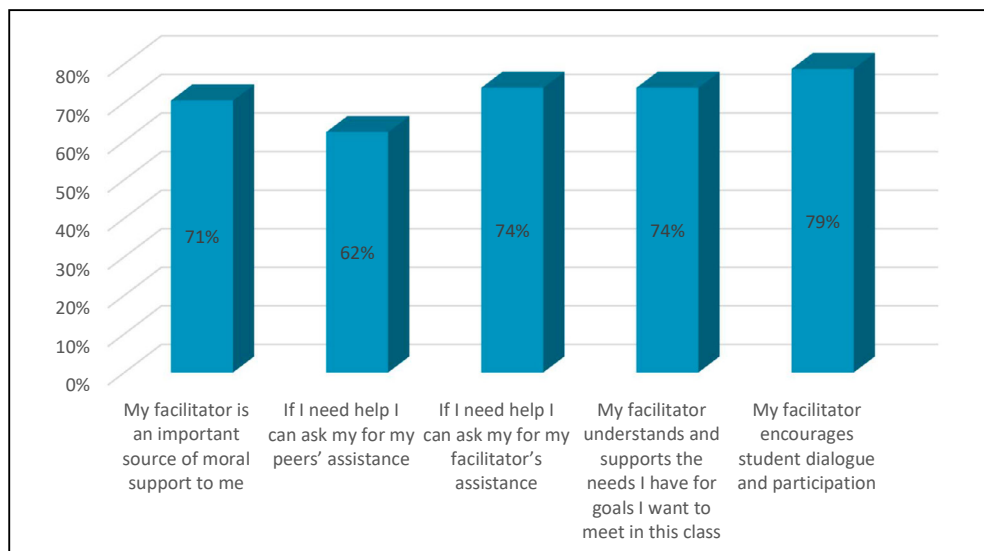

Figure 3: Students' perceptions of support and emotional connection with peers and teachers

In Figure 4, the emphasis on learning academic skills is felt by 74% of students, as well as almost 80% of students feeling a sense of inclusivity in group discussions. Students also mostly felt that activities acknowledge their individuality, that they are included, and that classmates are valuable to learning. This emphasis on "togetherness" and how it assists in learning (Speiser & Speiser, 2022), even to the extent of improving the ability to "write and read" is visible in student comments in Table 1 as well as in Figure 7, which shows valuable insight into how *Ubuntu* in the learning environment is perceived by students; the words "togetherness" and "openness" are mentioned 26 times, whilst "acquiring academic skills" and learning and knowledge are mentioned 51 times. Thus, the link between connection between both learners and teachers suggests a positive learning environment. This validates Makalela's (2018: 839-840) finding that a communal approach to learning, such as *Ubuntu* yields worthwhile results and assists teaching and learning.
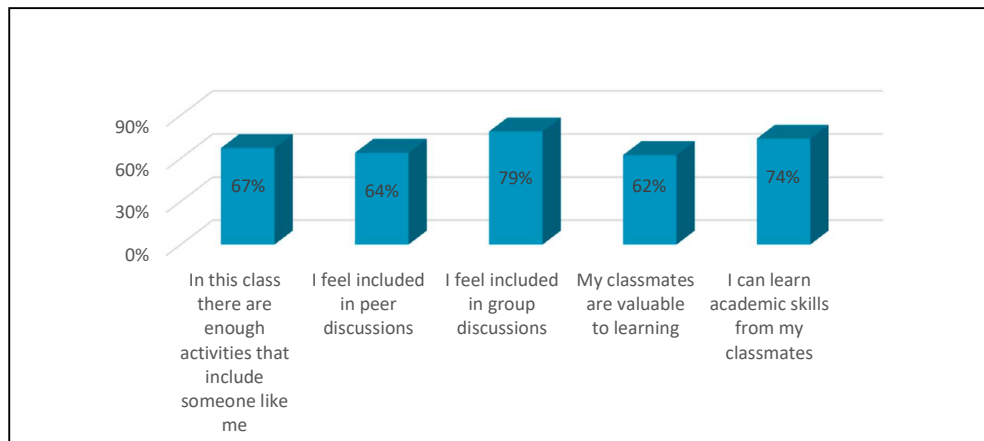
Figure 4: Student perception of peer support

In the table above there is constant mention in students' comments of support for one another's learning, with the aid of the facilitator. This is seen in the last comment in the second category of Table 1: the facilitator's kindness allows her students to feel that she wants the best results for them. So too, students do not judge one another, but rather "help [one another] to understand the content better". The summary of students' perceptions in Figure 7, which shows that "help" or "helpfulness" from both facilitator and students was mentioned 72 times, ultimately shows this supportive environment, which links with previous research (Carstens & Rambiritch, 2020; Lunsford, 1991; Van Wyk, 2014).

In Figure 5, the results for opportunity for influence reveal that students felt that they can take the sense of *Ubuntu* back into the community. Students felt inspired and more confident about university life; that they could help others, and that they belong to a wider university community. That more than 80% of students felt that they can help "other young people" is telling. Importantly, with an approach to teaching which embraces the African philosophy of *Ubuntu,* students felt that they could reach out to the wider community. The comments in Table 1 in the third category: Opportunity for influence, show evidence of students feeling that they were more prepared for "university and the workspace", that they were inspired, and confident and that they could apply what they have learnt to other modules. Keywords in Figure 7 make this visible as well. This supports previous research about skills transfer and successful acquisition of AL skills being a key attributor to success at university (Van Rooy & Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2015).
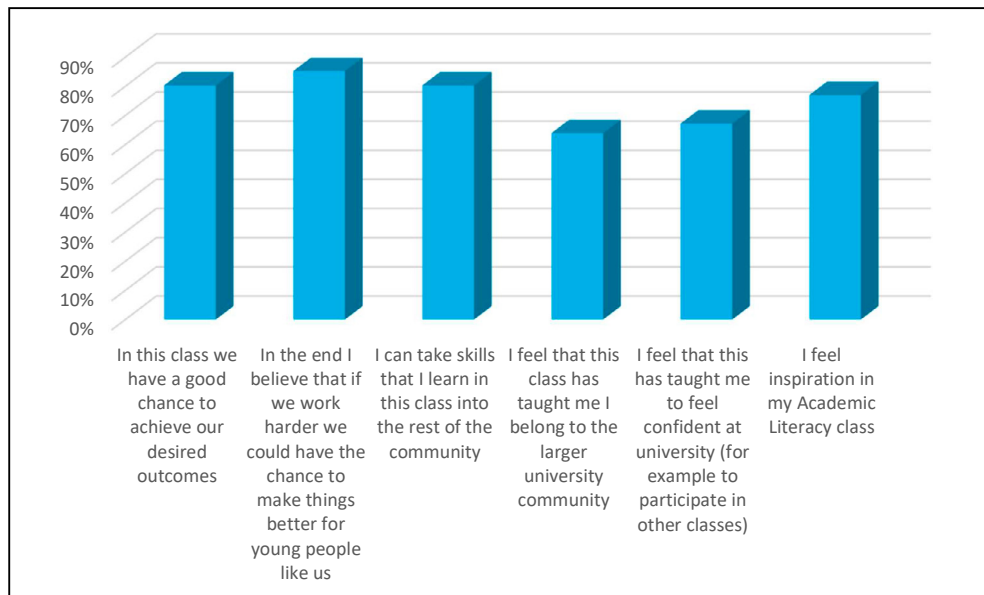
Figure 5: Perceptions of opportunity for influence

It is important to note some potential areas for improvement. Results were also found which could not have been predicted, but which could assist teachers in helping their students to adapt to university life. In Figure 6 below, what is quite concerning is that 56% of students felt that others were adapting to university life, but that they were not. In other words, more than half felt they were not meeting requirements, but that their peers were. This confirms Mann's (2001: 11) assertion that students often feel a level of alienation and isolation when they find themselves faced with the pressures of university life on first entry. Furthermore, it shows the level of support needed, especially on access programmes, but in general for first-year cohorts at South African universities. Although this survey took place shortly after the first semester, students still felt this sense of not keeping up. Notably, 75% of this group of students identified themselves as not feeling comfortable or open to working with peers. Thus, it can be surmised that students who are more willing to come together for learning may adjust more readily to university requirements. Furthermore, students who feel isolated might then benefit from further emphasis from the facilitator about ways in which *Ubuntu* and a social constructivist approach could benefit them in future.
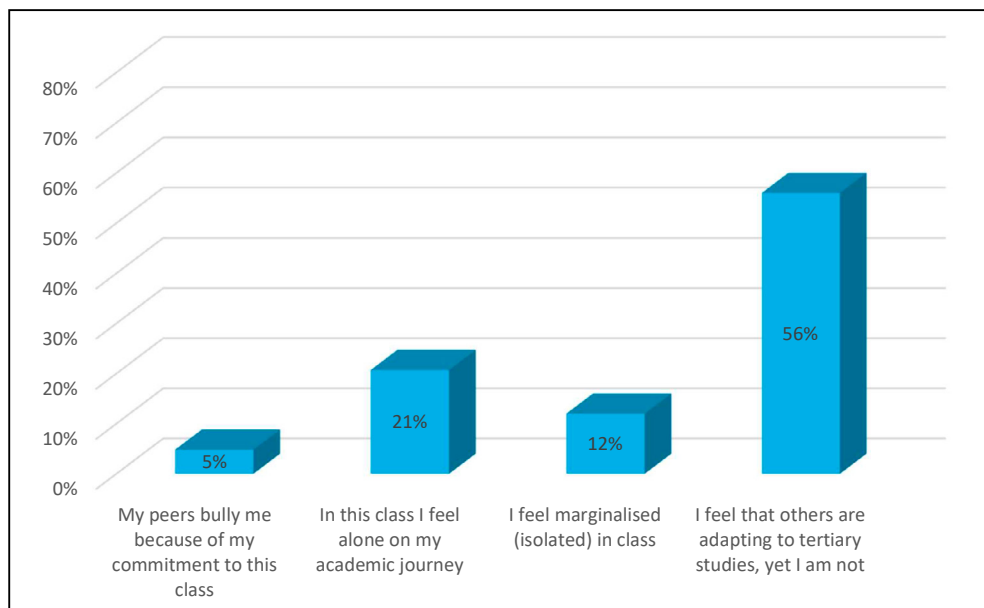
Figure 6: Student perceptions of areas for improvement

Figure 6 shows that, though a very small percentage of only 5%, students may feel bullied because of their commitment to their class. Only female students felt this way, which might point to a variety of factors at play. This is an opportunity for teachers to identify this potential hazard in class for those who may be perceived by others as doing well. That all were female is troubling. Also of significance is that most males, out of the 12% of students identified, admitted to feeling marginalised or isolated. Although possibly worrisome factors have been identified, a variety of factors outside the classroom may have had an impact on results. For example, students from this cohort usually suffer from a variety of socio-economic circumstances (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). No matter how harmonious one class might be, actual home circumstances and students' performance in other subjects cannot be forgotten. What is important is that students feel that they have a place of safety, especially if they might not always feel security outside of the classroom environment. This applies to the greater South African context where crime, poverty, gender violence, and other "racial and class inequalities" affect students every day to a level of which teachers might be unaware (Tomlin, 2016: 856). Thus, this further shows how embracing *Ubuntu* in the AL classroom, other classes and in the wider university culture would be beneficial.
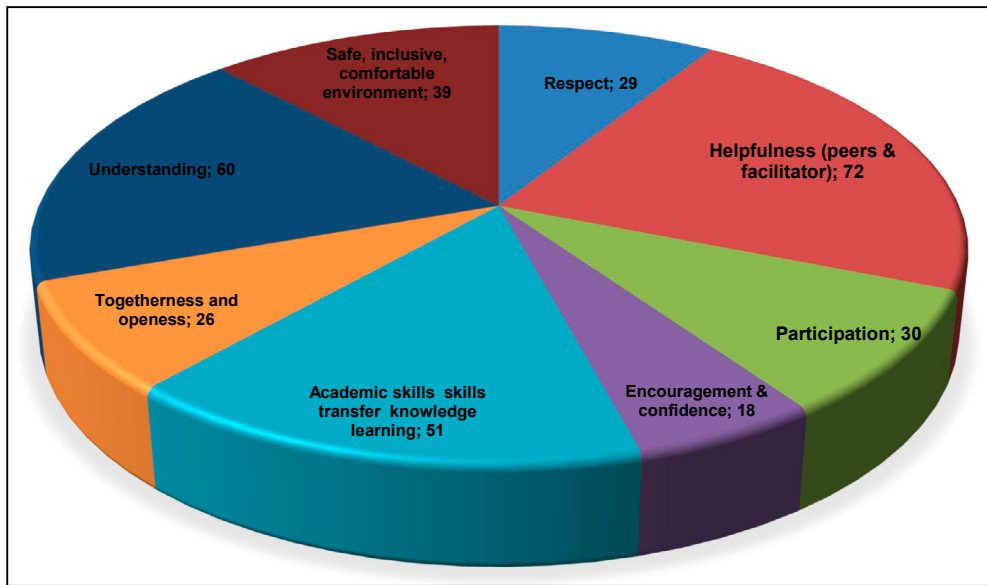
Figure 7: Primary keywords in students' comments

Lastly, and concerning Table 1, in the final category: A sense of *Ubuntu* in the classroom, it seems that the majority of students believe this atmosphere is present. It must be stated that neither of the researchers mentioned the aim of learning AL through *Ubuntu* at the time of the survey. This is something students came to conclusions about on their own, guided by the facilitator's social constructivist approach to teaching and learning. This also shows how teachers in an African society can build on an already known philosophy that embraces the community and which students are familiar with to enhance teaching and learning. For example, if students know they will be following this approach during the year, there may be more openness to learning. Furthermore, with the presence of *Ubuntu* in a classroom, students feel safe and may take this philosophy into other environments. In so doing, they may achieve empowerment (Cummins, 2009). This is vital to approaches of social justice within a South African context, where students often have a broad spectrum of socio-economic and discriminatory circumstances to overcome.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Based on reflections of teaching practices during the Covid-19 pandemic, teaching and learning in the AL classroom have transformed. Not only is the transition to higher education a daunting and at times defamiliarizing experience for most students, but Covid-19 further isolated students. This highlights the need for creating a classroom which promotes a sense of comfort, belonging and community in the post-Covid era, whether classes are face-to-face, blended or online. In this study, investigating the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* and whether its presence in the classroom could assist students in learning vital AL skills came to the fore. With such an environment in place, the positive academic outcomes and supporting skills are endless, and will most certainly grant students multiple opportunities to develop their academic skills within and even beyond the AL class. Thus, a social constructivist teaching approach creates such an environment where students feel safe, valued and have a true sense of *Ubuntu*.

A small percentage of students still felt a lack of confidence and experienced a sense of isolation. This study took place in the first semester, which means that possibly this would have improved with time. This could also be related to university life in general or other stressors. Repeating the survey at the end of the year could benefit the researchers in future, as well as possibly conducting more research into students' negative responses, such as the perception of "being the only one not keeping up at university". This would benefit future teaching and learning practices. For example, being aware that students feel they might not be keeping up can be addressed in class during orientation classes. In other words, if students know they are not alone in this feeling, it might assist in the learning environment and establish a greater sense of *Ubuntu* and learning as a common goal.

Ultimately, infusing *Ubuntu* in the classroom through a social constructivist approach provides many benefits to learners in an AL context. Most students felt that this approach made them feel safe, comfortable and able to interact with their teacher and peers for better learning. Improved confidence is a resounding theme in this research and something which will benefit students in AL. This may also assist them in building knowledge with others in the greater university environment and the workplace one day. This is something students themselves repeatedly stated with their own voices. Similarly, embracing this philosophy may also provide more potential for success in life through improved relationships and understanding of others. Furthermore, practitioners of AL and even other subjects may find such a teaching strategy both practical and successful in their classrooms.

References

Barron, L. & Kinney, P. 2021. *We belong: 50 strategies to create community & revolutionize classroom management.* Alexandria: ASCD.

Battistich, V., Solomon, D., Watson, M. & Schaps, E. 1997. Caring school communities. *Educational Psychologist,* 32: 137-151. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep3203_1

Bezuidenhout, J., Cilliers, F., Van Heuden, M., Wasserman, E. & Burch, V. 2011. Alienation and engagement in postgraduate training at a South African medical school. *Medical Teacher,* 33(3): 145-153. https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159X.2011.543198

Boughey, C. & McKenna, S. 2021. *Understanding higher education: Alternative perspectives.* Cape Town: African Minds. https://www.africanminds.co.za/understanding-higher-education/. https://doi.org/10.47622/9781928502210

Bryman, A., Bell, E., Hirschohn, P., Du Toit, J., Dos Santos, A, Wagner, C., Van Aardt, I. & Masenge, A. 2014. *Research methodology: Business management context*s. Oxford: Oxford University Press South Africa.

Carolissen, R. & Kiguwa, P. 2018. Narrative explorations of the micro-politics of students' citizenship, belonging and alienation at South African universities. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 32(3): 1-11. https://doi.org/10.20853/32-3-2542

Carstens, A. & Rambiritch, A. 2020. Theoretical grounding of writing centre practices: a foundation for tutor training. *Journal for Language Teaching* 54(1): 235-251. https://doi.org/10.4314/jlt.v54i1.7

Creswell, J. & Plano Clark, V. 2017. *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.) Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Cummins, J. 2009. Pedagogies of choice: challenging coercive relations of power in classrooms and communities. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 12(3): 261-271. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050903003751

Department of Welfare. 2017. *White paper for Social Welfare August 1997*: Principles, guidelines, recommendations, proposed policies and programmes for developmental social welfare in South Africa. https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/whitepaperonsocialwelfare0.pdf [Accessed 6 February 2023].

De Sousa, B., Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. & Soudien, C. 2022. Critical reflections on the place of the university in the 21st century. *South African Journal of Science Special Issue: Radical Reason* (118): 1-6. https://doi.org/Org/10.17159/sajs.2022/14835

Dhawan, S. 2020. Online learning: a panacea in the time of Covid-19 crisis. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 49(1): 5-22. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047239520934018

Dison, A. 2018. Development of students' academic literacies viewed through a political lens of care. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 32(6): 65-82. http://dx.doi.org/10.20853/32-6-2657

Dixson, M.D. 2010. Creating effective student engagement in online courses: What do students find engaging? *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 10(2): 1-13. https://doaj-org.ufs.idm.oclc.org/article/0b62a0db017e48ad850e9cf54431ec8c [Accessed: 15 November 2022].

Fleisch, B. 2008. *Primary education in crisis: why South African schoolchildren underachieve in reading and mathematics*. Cape Town: Juta.

Gay, G. & Betts, K. 2020. From discussion forums to e-meetings: Integrating high touch strategies to increase student engagement, academic performance, and retention in large online courses. *Online Learning Journal,* 24(1). https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v24i1.1984

Ghosh, A. 2021. Promoting student discourse in a linguistically diverse community-of-learners classroom. *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 17(1). https://doi.org/10.5070/D417150291

Goehring, C. & Whittington, H. 2017. Gender diversity and inclusivity in the classroom. *Montessori life: A publication of the American Montessori Society,* 29(2): 50-53.

Hausmann, L., Ye, F., Schofield, J. & Woods, R. 2009. Sense of belonging and persistence in White and African-American first-year students. *Research in Higher Education* 50: 649-669. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-009-9137-8

Lunsford, A. 1991. Collaboration, control and the idea of a writing center. *Writing Center Journal,* 12(1): 3-10. https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1252

Makalela, L. 2018. Community elders' narrative accounts of *ubuntu* translanguaging: Learning and teaching in African education. *International Review of Education,* 64: 823-843. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-018-9752-8

Mann, S.J. 2001. Alternative perspectives on the student experience: Alienation and engagement. *Studies in Higher Education*, 26(1): 7-19. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070020030689

Mbiti, J. 1989. *African religions and philosophy*. Oxford: Heinemann.

McKinley, J. 2015. Critical argument and writer identity: social constructivism as a theoretical framework for EFL academic writing. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies,* 12(3): 184-207. https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2015.1060558

Muir, T., Douglas, T. & Tremble, A. 2020. Facilitation strategies for enhancing the learning and engagement of online students. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice,* 17(3): 7-19. https://doi.org/10.53761/1.17.3.8

Petrillo, G., Capone, V. & Donizzetti, A.R. 2016. Classroom sense of community scale: Validation of a self-report measure for adolescents. *Journal of Community Psychology,* 44(3): 399-409. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21769

Schreiber, R. & Tomm-Bonde. 2015. Ubuntu and constructivist grounded theory: an African methodology package. *Journal of Research in Nursing,* 20(8): 655-664. https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987115619207

Speiser, V.M. & Speiser, P. 2022. There Are No Silos When We Are All Suffering: Interviews and Reflections on Ubuntu and the Arts in South Africa during Covid-19. *Creative Arts in Education and Therapy,* 8(1): 71-88. https://doi.org/10.15212/CAET/2022/8/2

Tomlin, H. 2016. Contesting ideologies and the struggle for equality: Reconsidering the politics of South Africa. *Policy Futures in Education,* 14(6): 846-863. https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210316658163

Van Rooy, B. & Coetzee-Van Rooy, S. 2015. The language issue and academic performance at a South African University. *Southern African Linguistics & Applied Language Studies,* 33(1): 31-46. https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2015.1012691

Van Wyk, A. 2014. English-medium education in a multilingual setting: A case in South Africa. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching,* 52(2): 205-220. https://doi.org/10.1515/iral-2014-0009

Watson, J. 2001. Social constructivism in the classroom. *Support for Learning,* 16(3): 140-146. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.00206

Waghid, Z., Meda, L. & Chiroma, J.A. 2021. Assessing cognitive, social and teaching presences during emergency remote teaching at a South African university. *International Journal of Information and Learning Technology,* 38(5): 413-432. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJILT-01-2021-0006

Zhu, Y., Zhang, L., Zhou, L., Zhou, X., Li, C. & Yang, D. 2021. The impact of social distancing during Covid-19: A conditional process model of negative emotions, alienation, affective disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder. *Journal of Affective Disorders* 281: 131-137. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2020.12.004