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An academic facilitator's commentary on teaching in a post-Covid-19 South Africa

Abstract

The importance of the academic writing facilitator's role – part of which involves the facilitator's capacity to master, and to enable students' confident navigation of increasingly digitised learning platforms¹ – has been widely noted in academic circles. Covid-19's aftermath has provided further impetus for the acceleration of higher education institutions' research output on the successes and shortcomings of curricular learning designs. The waves of the pandemic have also resulted in educators and students being challenged to craft innovative and creative ways to continue facilitating the learning process for the benefit of their students. The initial 'teething problems' accompanying the online migration of course content and sessions meant that the poorest students suffered doubly, for reasons including lack of access to technology, as well as poor signal/connectivity in rural areas. It is against this backdrop that this piece, phenomenological by nature, sets out to explore how and when meaningful relationships between students and facilitators might be forged for the sake of fostering meaningful, productive collaborations between facilitators and students enrolled in tertiary academic literacy courses. The overarching research question is how an educator's personal investment in, and commitment to the academic writing process might be evidenced by way of positive student feedback, generated and sourced from student evaluations.² The reader is invited to consider whether or not a correlation exists between the input of an experienced educator who displays genuine interest in her students' engagement in the course and positive student feedback. It is suggested that display of emotion (including, but not limited to exhibiting a sense of humour) corresponds positively with students' overall satisfaction with the course material and presentation thereof.

Keywords: *academic literacy, autoethnography, critical thinking skills, experiential knowledge, motivational teaching*

1 One well-known Artificial Intelligence (AI) phenomenon that has taken the world by storm is the 'chatbot', *Chat GPT*: an AI language model that was introduced in November 2022.

2 Actual positive student evaluations exist in relation to the author's praxis, sourced from data, made available to me by Dr Michelle Joubert at the University of the Free State's Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL).

1. Introduction

"They may forget what you said but they will not forget how you made them feel."

– Carl Buechner

Academic writing practitioners, also known as facilitators or literacy assistants at university centres of teaching and learning, are presented with a challenging task. It is required of us to assist our departments and faculties in meeting the key organisational targets. Additionally, assuming the student-facing role and being the first point of contact, we have to establish rapport with our student cohorts and educate them on the requirements of the course, its objectives, and more. Further, facilitators must prepare bespoke, student-centred sessions with educationally sound digital aids in service of boosting their cohorts' readiness for participation in academic discourse (both verbal and written). To this end, we are trained to emphasise the importance and applicability of our modules, which can be a difficult, emotionally taxing task. To contextualise, EAL modules are reserved for those students not deemed prepared or able to acclimatise readily into higher education without assistance. It is within this context that the author embarks upon a quest to comment on her experiences of facilitating an academic literacy module at a South African university, prior to, and during the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The author is interested in exploring links and dynamics between her emotional investment, as outlined in scattered educational encounters throughout two years in particular, and the qualitative content of students' biannual evaluations of the course at the end of given semesters. It is suggested in the short analysis that where a facilitator is driven to motivate, engage and encourage students, the likelihood of receiving positive input and feedback from students is greater.

The first section of this paper considers the figure of the dedicated and engaged teacher, i.e. what it means to use emotion and display of personality in the classroom. This piece partly serves to encourage educators to reflect academically on their teaching praxis, taking the effects that emotive teaching and teacher-student engagement has in/beyond the classroom seriously. The second part deals specifically with the figure of the struggling facilitator during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. The final section of my commentary or 'opinion piece' touches on a few prominent themes surrounding the role of technology – an overarching theme revealed in an increasing number of studies on the effects of Covid-19 on educational praxis and perception (open educational resources [OERs] included). Questions addressing the effects that shifting educational platforms have had on the perceptions, attitudes and predictions of various stakeholders (e.g. Guppy et al., 2022; Mafenya, 2022) are also included. Commentary on the exacerbation of social inequality in South African society is also evident.³

2. Methodology

I am conscious of the fact that I am voluntarily disclosing experiential (ontological) data, unique to my person and experience as a facilitator of an academic literacy module at an established higher education institution.

Attempts to position the subject of my opinion piece within established and widely researched literature pertinent to academic literacy literature has not been without difficulties. Situating one's research focus within a framework of existing literature and current debates

³ See Mafenya (2022) for a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of technology, contextualised within the Higher Education setting during the Covid-19 lockdown period.

around the subject of one's analysis is tantamount to fulfilling the requirements of following academic research protocol. Autoethnographic explorations (specifically from practising academic writing facilitators) are absent in the literature.⁴ The challenge, in the case of this brief explorative qualitative piece is to present useful narratives that are sufficiently detailed, if personal, simultaneously adhering to academic writing conventions, including the use of formal diction and phrasing. Arguably, using accounts of personal experience to buttress claims to knowledge seems to be about "strik[ing] a balance" (Manchi & Zakeri, 2020: 61). As Bolen (2017: par. 1) writes, "researchers continue to grapple with issues of representation, reflexivity, and self in their research practices".

The theoretical lens which has inspired the manner in which data have been collected and presented is auto ethnographical by nature. The data are both personal to the author, and further comprises digitally-collected data drawn from the institution's repository of student feedback surveys over a period of four semesters (two years; four evaluations). Autoethnography is that "autobiographical genre of ethnography that emphasizes the lived experiences of researchers" (Bolen, 2017: par. 1). Autoethnography has been described as a "transformative research method" (Custer, 2014: 2) and requires "vulnerability [fostering of], empathy, embod[ied] creativity and innovation" (Custer, 2014: 2).⁵ Autoethnographic research "remains somewhat mysterious to many scholars" (Cooper & Lilyea, 2021: 196). This could be the case for being misunderstood as a research tool, or understood by scholars as limited to only certain lines of academic enquiry. Nevertheless, as Cooper and Lilyea (2021: 196) remark, "[r]ecognising both the flexibility and creativity inherent in autoethnography" is as important as "the need for rigor in achieving meaningful research results".

3. The matter/manner of teaching

Quite often it has been said that teaching is a "calling". Serin's (2017) short piece on the imperative of passion in teaching was published years before the effects of Covid-19 were felt in the educational milieu. Serin (2017: 60) considers the "passionate teacher as someone who is in love with the field of knowledge, deeply excited about the ideas that change our world, and closely interested in the potentials and dilemmas of young people who come to class every day".

What does it mean to be a teacher in the post-Covid-19 era, though? Felix (2020: 33) recalls the "classic image" of an educator as the "old, wise, and powerful stoic with oceans of knowledge". Alternative images of the teacher, including one depicting the educator not seen to possess or disseminate knowledge, are not novel or revolutionary anymore. What is, however, alarming educators at present is the question: Will educators' roles become obsolete or completely transformed in the near future, "soon ... replaced by technology" (Felix, 2020: 33)? Considering the various implications of education's adoption of artificial intelligence software, Felix (2022: 33) posits that teachers as unique individuals and human beings offer the "advantage of [their] uniquely human expertise". To elaborate on Felix's (2022: 33) point, not even ground-breaking advances in technology "[can] be bodily present in the same way as human teachers". Additionally (to date, anyhow), only *human* instructors – regarded as unique individuals, capable of offering bespoke, sometimes humorous, experimental, unexpected learning designs and approaches – offer opportunities for genuine, human engagement and exchange of affect (whether in a remote setting, or in person). In other words, facilitators will

4 To the best of my knowledge, this point appears to be valid at the time this article was submitted.

5 By way of comparison, a phenomenographic research approach not dissimilar to autoethnography, is focused primarily on descriptive, subjective and experiential data (Svennson, 1997: 162, 167).

continue to enable their students to reflect on their experiences of learning, and the processes of their thinking and writing. Positioned within a wider community (society), we have the privilege of being in a position to instil “a sense of self, history, and society” (Felix, 2022: 33) in the minds of vulnerable/susceptible minds in higher education. Indeed, passion, otherwise conceptualised as a type of call to action is “based on commitment”, being “at the heart of effective teaching” (Serin, 2017: 61).

‘Calling’ has been described as “a strong inner impulse toward a particular course of action” (Merriam-Webster.com, n.d.). In this qualitative, phenomenological study, the noun, “impulse” is not to be confused with another form of it, e.g. “to be impulsive”. Rather, the sense of impulse is here associated with passion and affect, hereby interpreted as a sense of urgency or passion for facilitating learning and meaning-making in higher education. Imagine a facilitator labouring over how to help her students come to grips with key concepts. Commenting now on the “particular course of action” (Merriam-Webster.com, n.d.), being attuned to the purpose of this project, we can perceive action as inherently positive or neutral. Let us consider a passionate teacher’s approach in and out of the classroom. In addition to being vivacious and curious, such a facilitator provides his/her students ‘actionable feedback’ during the course of assessing students’ writing abilities. Put differently, the opportunity to aid students in how they shape and change their minds instils in them a passion for a particular subject and motivates struggling students to persevere is a privilege.

An educator’s willingness to laugh at him/herself can be seen to afford students comic relief in an otherwise quite serious educational setting. To illustrate, during a session with my students, I am prone to flouting the Gricean maxim of relation, something which most students find amusing, even if one or two roll their eyes at me. I would start explaining one point, but then veer off on a tangent, sometimes not knowing what I was attempting to argue in the first place. This might be perceived as symptomatic of disorderly teaching, although I have found it to work to my advantage in terms of maximising students’ attention spans.

A certain level of humility is required on the part of the facilitator to engage students on a level where genuine learning can take place. Comments such as the following examples illustrate a personalised and positive approach when assessing a student’s work:

“I know this is hard, but with practice it gets easier.”

“You have interesting ideas; see if you can link those with the topic more clearly.”

“E-mail me if you have any questions about my feedback.”

“If you find a more interesting academic source, show it to me, and let’s see if we can make it work in your paper.”

Throughout 2020 and 2021, the vast majority of students who submitted an online course evaluation evaluated my sessions and the course I teach positively. The following anonymous comments are traced back to the evaluations of students who were enrolled in any one of my classes in either 2021 or 2022:

“My Facilitator made my first year memorable and interesting. Always looked forward to her class the rest of my classes were a drag.”

“I enjoyed this module. I am extremely glad I got to do this module because I know that I will use most of the skills learnt during the rest of my course years.”

"This module was the best module ever."

"My facilitator was doing her job and made it easier for us to enjoy and willing to learn."

"Wish there was a 2nd-year module."

"I hope that my facilitator and other facilitators to continue doing a great job in making sure that we learn everything that they have taught us."

"Everything that we were taught was made easier for us which made me enjoy every lesson. May all the facilitators continue doing the great work."

"I appreciate all the effort that were put in to make online learning a success for the students."

"My facilitator made me first semester interesting and made the module interesting."

"It was a great and enjoyable module."

Of course, there are also comments relating to the challenges that were experienced by students during the transitioning period:

"Can we please go back to campus the online learning is killing some us including me."

"The allocated time for this course in a day is way too much and the breakout groups are not really helpful."

The "break-out groups" were difficult to manage, in that many students would rather sign out of a session for persistent connectivity issues or simply stay 'muted', as opposed to engaging with other students online. It was also technically difficult to manage such groups and moderate groups discussions online, since one could not, still cannot be in more than one 'class' at a time.

4. Facilitating throughout ordinary and extraordinary times

"Being vulnerable on paper" is tough when "doing critical autoethnography" (Manchi & Zakeri, 2020: 61). This is particularly salient when the subject of study (the author, in this case) lives with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), experiencing the seemingly ordinary as extraordinary, battling with time management and prioritisation of tasks. Allow me to illustrate by rewinding to a few years *before* Covid-19. Typically, I could be seen at home, grabbing a class register, study guide and accompanying stationery (not sparing chalk for 'plan B'), messily thrown into a canvas carrier bag, as I headed to the campus with a sense of urgency to reach the teaching venue timeously. Upon entering the university campus, the first challenge was locating a suitable parking bay as closely as possible to the teaching venue in question. Raised cortisol levels, associated with the necessity to reach a venue before the start of a session to access and set up the venue equipment, became an all too familiar picture in my case.

Eye-to-eye contact was always difficult for me when facing a group of students. It still is, and yet the thrill of seeing expectant faces I learn to know better throughout an academic year is compensation enough for the added stress. Despite the anxiety-inducing, visceral effects experienced when having to face a cohort of 45 academic literacy students in a physical

classroom, the academic literacy module's migration to online mediation of academic literacy sessions meant an extra challenge for certain educators, including the author. One of the most distressing aspects about having to facilitate students' acquisition of academic writing skills (required of them to graduate, to be sure) was *not* being able to see, hear and physically be present for the students.

Following the transition from presenting face-to-face to virtual classes, I recall students' accounts of feeling isolated, confused and frustrated. Like many others in similar positions, make-shift workspaces had to be constructed almost overnight at home by students and educators alike. It was daunting, but one had to adapt, only to have to altering one's methods of instruction again two years later.

During the 'lock-down' period, facilitators received memorandums and reminders of their contractual obligations to provide equally effective educational experiences for the good of the students and institution. Note-taking was practised at each training opportunity, including 'survival tips' amidst the chaotic circumstances at the time. Chancing upon the above-mentioned note-taking, I reflect on the 'mantras' that were likely intended to motivate the most despondent of facilitators at the time. The future is not certain; of that we can be sure, and therefore it is worth reflecting on what has been learnt.

Briefly directing the focus to my recollected experience of a certain training session in February of 2021, a few excerpts taken from my note-taking during the session in question are provided here:

"We have to think differently about facilitating and our roles as facilitators."

"The tried-and-tested methods no longer serve us."

"We have to keep providing the service to our students/clients, upholding the required standards of our department and university."

Unsurprisingly, these 'mantras' did little to ameliorate the levels of anxiety I had already been experiencing prior to the lockdown period during Covid-19.

A prevalent theme that gradually came into focus at academic institutions throughout the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic was how academic writing assistants and writing consultants would/could continue engaging students effectively without face-to-face interaction. The latter concern precipitated emergency measures, where new training manuals for facilitators had to be signed off and rolled out for short-notice online training. Despite all departmental efforts to secure continuity of the academic programme, constituting attempts to mitigate the inevitable disruptions to learning opportunities for students, many students and facilitators (for a time, at least) lacked access to the necessary digital devices as well as sufficiently fast and stable WiFi connections.

The lack of connectedness was further exacerbated by the reality that a vast number of students lacked the know-how or economic means to purchase sufficient amounts of cellular data, thus excluding them from participating in what was made available online. It is the theme of technology that hampers or enables learning that will be considered next.

5. Digitisation in post-pandemic higher education in South Africa

With rapid advances in information technology in the post-Covid-19 era, collaborative efforts between teachers and students have exacted an increasing amount of psychological ‘bandwidth’ from educators. I recall the immediate drop in motivation levels experienced when switching to an online mode of teaching during the lockdown period. I missed the personal and live interaction that had been taken for granted. In retrospect, I had become aware of my heavy reliance on body language, facial expression and gesticulation to communicate effectively in a teaching session. Online interaction with students meant that I had to rely more strongly on chat-based interaction with students, and a carefully paced, easy-to-listen-to voice (not dissimilar to that of a radio-show host). We developed new skills, to be sure, and even though we are teaching in physical venues again (most of us, anyway), new challenges await us.

The dawn of an era where language and text-generating artificial intelligence (AI) applications are used by experienced and inexperienced authors alike is a troubling thought for some. Commentary heard in the halls of academia includes “*ChatGPT* is here to stay”; “Adapt or die”, along with similar sentiments by those that are most interested in the sensational aspect of technological advances. Notwithstanding the inevitability of change itself, “State-of-the-art AI applications cannot be bodily present in the same way as human teachers, nor teach existential reflection, norms and values, or a sense of self, history, and society” (Felix, 2020: 33). Either way, there appear to be serious implications for how we will come to view and practise teaching and mentoring in the years to come in light of recent technological advances.

In a paper titled ‘Post-Pandemic Future of Educational Technology’ the authors show that while increasingly digitised forms of learning have proliferated in higher education, “a digital disconnect continues whereby the availability of educational technology exceeds its application to learning” (Guppy *et al.*, 2022: 1751). Covid-19’s ripple effects continue to plague us in that citizens’ flexibility, adaptability and resilience prove crucial in keeping our heads above water. It is also found that “[e]xpectations regarding technology-mediated learning post-Covid-19 are mixed, hampering planning for the future” (Guppy *et al.*, 2022: 1751).

Mafenya’s (2022) comparative analysis on the (perceived) benefits and drawbacks of educational technology and online learning platforms also comments, albeit briefly, on deeper societal themes in South Africa (2022: 214, 220). Mafenya (2022: 218) finds that the “pandemic has posed several challenges to developing countries like South Africa”. Further, he notes that educational institutions’ “[r]eliance on technology ... hampers “the transition of learners toward online learning in less developed countries” (Mafenya, 2022: 218). Nevertheless, by way of addressing one of his research questions, i.e., how “continuity of teaching and learning [can] be strengthened during emergency situations” (Mafenya, 2022: 216), he concludes that “despite some challenges brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, technology has the potential to sustain teaching and learning, especially in times of crisis” (Mafenya 2022: 220). Mafenya’s (2022) study around educational technology as a (possible) enabler of learning ends on a similar note, albeit the comparative, mixed-methods study’s arguments can be perceived by the reader as ambiguous. For instance, Mafenya’s review of the literature “indicates that distance learning [has] a negative impact on student learning” (2022: 220), where he cites “social isolation of students and social disconnection as areas of major concern” (Mafenya, 2022: 220). It is clear from both the aforementioned studies (Guppy *et al.*, 2022; Mafenya, 2022) that student responses to extended remote/digitised learning are mixed.

Indeed, while some of my students made use of the advantages of studying remotely, others complained about ways in which they were disadvantaged in the process. As communicated by one of my previous students,

"What I like most about online class is that I can work around my own schedule and sort of pace myself so that it does not become too overwhelming."

Complaints about missing out on first-year campus life and face-to-face interaction were common. Examples to substantiate the latter, sourced from student feedback analysis (referred to elsewhere in this paper) comprise the following comments by three different former students of mine, in response to an online survey question:⁶

"The network connection sometimes is not good";

"network is a problem";

"The network connection can be bad then you will be forced to watch the recordings. You do not get to see your facilitator and your classmates."

It has been forecast that the ways "higher learning [institutions operate] will not return to a pre-Covid-19 normality"; that is, "if a pre-Covid-19 'normal' could even be defined" in the first place (Guppy et al., 2022: 1751). It waits to be seen what higher education institutions will experience in due course. Guppy et al. (2022: 1760) further suggest that what was learnt from our experiences from Covid-19 *can* be harnessed "if it prompts [course] instructors to reflect on " 'why' " they teach as they do" (Guppy et al., 2022: 1760).



Figure 1: 'The long wait'

Source: Photograph courtesy of the author, taken 8 September 2023 at a University of the Free State teaching venue on the Bloemfontein Campus.

⁶ The "question" takes the shape of a statement on which students can comment: "There are opportunities for questions and discussions during class."

6. Conclusion

This paper started with a commentary on the importance of teaching, in general, and about the service of academic writing facilitators, in extraordinary times. Not all educators (including facilitators of academic literacy) might have adapted equally well to relatively novel and ground-breaking digital tools with which to teach. Having 'sifted' through student feedback from former students (collected digitally by my department during 2021 and 2022, respectively), I have identified that the majority of students with whom I have worked, during and after Covid-19, have positive perceptions regarding being in the academic literacy classroom, be it during one of my online or face-to-face sessions. Certainly, this is reassuring.

If one chooses, as authors have, to assume the role of the subject for the purposes of understanding the dynamics between a facilitator's teaching method and the feedback of his/her students, one would be embarking upon a road less travelled. "The fear of exposing [one's] feelings" (Manchi & Zakeri, 2020: 61) of oneself is not uncommon. After all, a (critical) autoethnographic lens constitutes "a *qualitative* method that provides situated [lived] knowledge" (Manchi & Zakeri, 2020: 61). It is hoped that this piece inspires educators and researchers to think differently about, and reflect on, their teaching practices and methodologies, and to re-imagine experiential, insightful routes to knowledge co-production.

In closing, facilitators of academic writing courses have the potential for, and unique opportunity to engage and motivate academic literacy students on a more holistic level. It has been suggested that there is a correlation between positive emotional investment in student-centred sessions, and students' own perceptions about the value of a particular course. If injecting enthusiasm (and sometimes nervous energy suffices) into one's facilitation of reading and writing sessions, students are more likely to experience their academic journey as a whole as positive and valuable. This might well serve to fuel students' motivation to participate in academic discourses, despite the odds stacked against them.⁷

This brief commentary on a particular facilitator's lived experience of teaching ('the good, the bad and the ugly') incorporates evidence of positive student feedback and is suggestive of how students' responses might be used more effectively in shaping our teaching praxis positively. Students' concerns and suggestions are equally useful, constituting an open dialogue around how we could enrich and improve our collective teaching praxis, including the judicious use of technology in the classroom. General concerns about how increased digitisation might threaten to render the role of the teacher as obsolete (Felix, 2020: 33) are to be expected. Nevertheless, the role of human educators and researchers adapting to personal and societal challenges in creative and unique ways is more crucial than ever.

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⁷ As Oliver (2019: 67) concludes, a one-year writing course is not enough time in which to aid students' assimilation into the wider academic community and culture.

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