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Editorial

The Covid-19 pandemic brought about a profound transformation in the landscape of higher education. This special issue delves into the complex and far-reaching impact of the pandemic on academic continuity, with a particular focus on the challenges faced by academic literacy practitioners during this extraordinary period.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented and rapid shift in higher education. Universities and colleges worldwide were compelled to abandon traditional in-person teaching methods and pivot to online learning modalities. This abrupt transition disrupted established academic routines and posed numerous challenges for educators, students, and institutions alike.

A central concern that emerged during this upheaval was the preservation of academic continuity. Educators and institutions were faced with the daunting task of ensuring that learning outcomes remained intact despite the shift to remote instruction. This challenge was compounded by the need to maintain student engagement and motivation in an online learning environment, where the physical separation of students posed unique obstacles to connection and participation.

Moreover, the pandemic disrupted the conventional academic calendar, compelling institutions to reimagine academic schedules, develop contingency plans, and adapt assessment methods to accommodate remote learning. The concept of a cohesive academic community was put to the test as students and educators found themselves physically isolated from one another and the familiar campus environment.

This issue features a variety of research papers covering a wide spectrum of topics, themes and relevant issues in academic literacy development in higher education.

Focusing on the ways in which specific online tools can be used to create social spaces within the online space, Hunma *et al.*'s "The social uses of the online chatroom as a boundary object for the acquisition of academic literacy in pandemic times" reports on the social applications of the online chatroom as a boundary object for the development of academic literacy in pandemic times. The authors

suggest that the Covid-19 epidemic has sparked ongoing pedagogical shifts in the higher education sector, particularly with the introduction of online modalities. The digital transition raised concerns about student involvement and the need to guarantee that, despite physical distance, students did not feel alienated from online learning environments.

Church's article about "Optimising academic writing assessment during Covid-19: The development of multiple choice tests to develop writing without writing" addresses how online assessment tools can be maximised for optimal learning. Church specifically focuses on the creation and outcomes of formative, multiple-choice questions for online assessments, which are targeted at promoting critical thinking and assessing the higher-order features of academic writing. Furthermore, the article describes and illustrates how Church's experiments with online assessment have evolved through purposeful test item design and online test setup. Church also provides a statistical analysis of student participation and outcomes.

Shifting gears to focus on the impact of Covid-19 on writing centres, Archer's contribution, "Academic Literacy and Writing Centre Practitioners' responses to Covid-19 and the move to online/blended teaching and learning" focuses on the impact of remote online learning on writing centres. Writing centre practitioners also had to learn how to navigate the online space in a short amount of time, and continue to reimagine the writing centre space and its role in the institution even since the majority of institutions have returned to face-to-face instruction.

Continuing with a focus on writing centres, Namakula *et al.*'s "From 'business as usual' to 'business unusual': Online academic literacy development for education students during the Covid-19 pandemic" emphasises how the Covid-19 pandemic imposed constraints on physical connections, impacted the ways in which instructors and students lived and worked. Because of the constraints, writing centres at universities and other educational institutions throughout the world have had to reimaging their space, while shifting from conventional face-to-face means of student support to online or remote techniques.

"The role of writing centres in negotiating inclusive learning spaces in the context of Covid-19" by Govender stresses about the importance of acknowledging the socio-economic difficulties faced by students. Govender sees the value of communities of practice and taking a humanistic approach in the work of writing centres in assisting students to cope with the challenges and complex realities with which they are currently confronted. Govender's study found that tutors are central to contributing to transformative multi-modal learning and the writing centre can serve as a vehicle for promoting and sustaining inclusive learning environments and new ways of supporting students during uncertain times such as the pandemic.

Shifting perspectives from writing centres towards reflection, Shutte *et al.*'s article "Course correction: the role of reflective writing assessment in a post-pandemic Academic Literacy course" considers the importance of reflective writing evaluation in a post-pandemic Academic Literacy course. The authors acknowledge the challenges that many institutions and students have with plagiarism, as well as with critical thinking and writing. The authors contend that navigating these challenges in the online space requires different techniques to those previously employed in traditional face-to-face learning. They thus attempted to adapt their provision and utilise new ways of evaluating writing in order to mitigate the severity of these challenges.

Van Heerden and Bharuthram investigates first-year student's sense and the impact of online learning on first-year students' sense of belonging in a 'post pandemic' academic literacy module. Drawing on qualitative data obtained via two online questionnaires, this paper conceptualises the impact of online learning on students' sense of belonging by focusing on the interconnected nature of spatial, academic and social belonging, which serves to foster an overall sense of personal belonging.

Focusing on the classroom space, Sparks *et al.*'s article "*Ubuntu* in the academic literacy class: establishing a sense of community for inclusivity and effective learning" takes readers through the ways in which the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* was leveraged in the classroom space to create a sense of community and inclusion during the pandemic – both important for successful learning in the academic literacy class. Their research aims to explore how the creation of a classroom community, through *Ubuntu*, can positively impact learning since it allows a teacher/lecturer to recognise students' diversity via inclusion. This facilitates learning in the academic literacy class through social teaching approaches, which eventually help students succeed at university.

Marais' "An autoethnographic inquiry: An academic facilitator's commentary on teaching in a post-Covid-19, AI world" focuses on how educators' personal investment in and commitment to the academic writing process can translate into positive student feedback, generated and sourced from student evaluations. Marais' study utilises an autoethnographic research approach in establishing that a correlation exists between personally-invested facilitators (experienced educators who display genuine interest in their students' overall wellbeing) and evidence of student engagement (for instance, academic literacy students' positive summative evaluations, captured on e-learning platforms).

The disruptions presented by the Covid-19 pandemic and the sudden shift to emergency remote teaching and learning required paradigm shifts, as well as creative and brave responses from academic literacy and writing centre practitioners. The pandemic also served to demonstrate practitioners' resilience, with academic programmes and support initiatives continuing despite the overwhelming obstacles posed by the pandemic as evidenced by the articles in this special issue. The future does indeed look bright, especially when we take this moment to reflect on the future possibilities for academic literacy development and writing centre work. We thus hope this selection of articles provides critical insights into the numerous aspects of academic literacy and writing centers and sparks conversations on how we can continue adapting and improving our practices.