





**AUTHOR:****Moeain Arend** Language Development Group,  
University of Cape Town   
Cape Town, South Africa**Aditi Hunma** Language Development Group,  
University of Cape Town   
Cape Town, South Africa**Minga Kongo** Graduate School of Business,  
Institute for Humanities in  
Africa (HUMA), University  
of Cape Town   
Cape Town, South Africa

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# Capturing degrees of centring of refugees in an academic literacy course in post-Apartheid South Africa: A retrospective look at course design through the lens of Actor-network Theory

## Abstract

*In 2018, we received state funding for 'curriculum reform' to design an academic literacy course that would orient students to legitimate ways of reading and writing in the academy while fostering critical citizenship. Thus, drawing on the view of literacy as a social practice, the course design was shaped around relatable content, in this case, the issue of border-crossing. At that time, some media coverage and popular opinion perpetuated an essentialist view of refugees as a socio-economic and health threat in South Africa and other parts of the globe. Unfortunately, this is still prevalent locally and elsewhere. We understand border-crossing as both physical and conceptual while also acknowledging the internal displacement as well, dating back to the apartheid regime when borders were created within South Africa along 'ethnic' and 'racial lines'. We also acknowledge how the social death (Patterson, 1982) experienced by some previously marginalised South Africans has had repercussions on how they view refugees. In this social context, we sought to design and implement an academic literacy course that was socially responsive in post-apartheid South Africa, marked by rapid social changes, and coupled with cases of xenophobia targeting refugees from other parts of Africa. To analyse how the course responded to these broader issues, we employed an actor-network theory lens, drawing specifically on Callon's (1984) description of translation, the process through which a stable actor-network is created. We took a retrospective look at the course over five years, focusing on the changes from the first to subsequent iterations. In our reflections, we superimposed Callon's (1984) four moments of translation, namely problematisation, interessement, enrolment and mobilisation, on the design process. In doing so, we surfaced the design and strategies to create a stable actor-network of associations between human and non-human actors. Through our retrospective look, we argue that for the design of a stable network, in other words, a practical academic literacy course that responds critically to cross-border migration through reading*



and writing, “the refugee” must be implicated in these four moments. Furthermore, we highlight how “the refugee” oscillated between various “degrees of centring” during these moments as part of the strategies employed by translators (course designers) to stabilise the network.

**Keywords:** academic literacy, cross-border migration, refugee, xenophobia, actor-network theory, translation, design principles

## 1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, South Africa has been touted in state policies and media representations as the ‘rainbow nation’, a young democracy embracing the ideal of ‘unity in diversity’. However, the social definition of ‘diversity’ has not always extended to those beyond its borders if one considers the xenophobic events of 2005, 2008 and 2019. This attitude exists even though many African nations demonstrated solidarity towards anti-apartheid activists in the spirit of African brotherhood. Internally, the divisions between the haves and have-nots, which in part originate from the racial segregation during the colonial and apartheid eras, appear to have endured for the poorest sections of society despite commendable progress made through affirmative action. According to Sichone (2008), this situation has led to a scramble for resources between those who feel marginalised within South Africa and those entering it in search of opportunities and a haven from atrocities back in their home country. However, it would be erroneous to place the entire blame for xenophobic sentiments on people experiencing poverty and the entire blame for economic challenges on refugees (Sichone, 2008).

It is against this complex tableau that in 2019, we designed our academic literacy course, *Writing Across Borders*. This first-year, second-semester blended course introduces online weekly resources and tasks ahead of lectures. Weekly lectures then take the form of discussions, twice in person and once in the online chatroom. While being a relatively new course, interestingly, the course attracts students across years of study and disciplines. It focuses on the themes of cross-border migration and “the refugee”. By overlaying the four moments of translation (Callon, 1984), namely problematisation, intersement, enrolment and mobilisation, onto the design process of the course, we take a retrospective look at how *Writing Across Borders* was designed.

Two of the authors of this paper are course designers and lecturers, and the third is a former refugee who actively participates in the curriculum design through a first-person narrative of his journey across borders to South Africa. We argue that a practical academic literacy course such as *Writing Across Borders*, which aims to sensitise students to the issues of cross-border migration and refugees, hinges on creating a stable actor network consisting of associations between human and non-human actors in which literacy is implicated. We further argue that in this process, which includes the four moments of translation mentioned above, “the refugee” oscillates between various degrees of centring. As we will show in the paper, the centring takes different forms during translation as part of the strategies translators employ in creating and ensuring the maintenance of a stable network, which led to the design of the first and subsequent iterations of the academic literacy course.

## 2. Literacy as social practice

The pedagogic approaches underpinning the *Writing Across Borders* course stem from a social uses account of literacy (Street, 1993; Lea & Street, 1998) whereby academic literacy is viewed not as a standard and neutral set of skills but as a social practice, embedded in a

particular socio-academic context. This context-specific understanding of literacy or ideological view steers away from an autonomous, skills-based view of literacy. The ideological view acknowledges that literacy does things to people as much as people do things to it (Kulick & Stroud, 1993). Therefore, an academic literacy course on a diverse university campus in a diverse nation such as South Africa cannot be impervious to the socio-academic practices that students engage in and bring to the classroom, nor can it ignore the broader social context of cross-border migration and othering. In reflecting on the transformative nature of academic literacy, Thesen (2015: 422) describes it as 'theoretically informed activism to change practice'. One of her definitions of Academic Literacy (with capital letters) as *epistemology and methodology* centres on the 'alternative, more socially just, innovative practices where new forms of hybrid writing can take hold' (2015: 424). Through readings that present different perspectives about refugees, episodes of the first-hand experience of a refugee, and writing tasks that prompt students to reflect on this case study in light of their autobiographies, *Writing Across Borders* may be doing more than just teaching academic writing but interrogates, through the act of writing, ideas of belonging and nationhood in the post-apartheid context.

### 3. Designing the course: The creation of the network

The *Writing Across Borders* course can be viewed as situated within a network of human and non-human associations developed through a process which Callon (1984) refers to as 'translation'. In our case, the translators are us as course designers. Other human actors would include DHET, members of the university committees, lecturers, tutors, students, and refugees interviewed. Non-human actors would include interview episodes, the prescribed readings, online guided reading resources, repurposed MOOC videos, and the learning management system, to name a few.

Michael (2017:164) argues that the translation process involves redefining an actor's interests "by whatever means possible" so that they act in the interests of a network. The translation of these actors involves four essential translation moments: problematisation, interessement, enrolment and mobilisation (Callon, 1984). Law (1990) refers to the four moments and the strategies employed by translators during these moments as the 'tactics of translation' because their success allows translators to order human and non-human actors by associating them to create a network of associations. Therefore, creating a stable network hinges on the associations between human and non-human actors to endure across time and space. In what follows, we describe and overlay the four translation moments onto the course's design process.

#### 3.1 First iteration

##### 3.1.1 *The moment of problematisation*

The moment of problematisation is characterised by translators of the network establishing which actors, human and non-human, should form part of the network. In addition, the translators claim to know the needs of the actors they wish to translate, and therefore, they work toward convincing them that the roles assigned to them are acceptable and serve their interests (Clarke, 2002). During the moment of problematisation and as part of the translation tactics, translators formulate a question that would assist them in creating the network, ultimately leading to particular associations between human and non-human actors.

The *Writing Across Borders* course was initially conceived as a 'wrapped' version<sup>1</sup> of our Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) *Writing Your World*, a four-week online academic literacy gateway course for those transitioning from high school to university. Its subtitle is, thus, *Finding yourself in the academic space*. The intention behind the wrapped version was to repurpose videos from the MOOC to create a context-specific version of the course for Humanities students, which would address a current undergraduate curriculum issue, in this case, students' struggles with academic literacy practices. The course thus received seed funding from DHET under the 'curriculum reform' category.

In the years preceding the course design, we noted a drop in students' performance from the first to the second year, which we attributed to the fact that there was a significant jump in academic literacy expectations between the first and second years. At the same time, we also noted a rise in xenophobic sentiments in South Africa and elsewhere. Therefore, when we applied for seed funding from DHET, the problematisation which underpinned the design of our academic literacy course was: How can we teach academic literacy through the theme of cross-border migration, and, in so doing, sensitise students to the issues "the refugee" faces in a post-apartheid South Africa and the world?

However, this initial problematisation changed when we constituted a research team with lecturers and postgraduate Humanities students. In the process, we noted that the causes underlying the drop in students' performance from a lecturer, tutor and student perspective were attributed to academic reading and research difficulties. Therefore, we revisited the initial problematisation, while still centring the refugee and issues around cross-border migration.

We were aware that by being responsive to issues of xenophobia in our context and beyond, our approach to academic literacy would be primarily one of social practices embedded in relevant contexts rather than a set of neutral skills. Other important questions that we, as translators, asked were: Will lecturers see the need for such a course? Will there be buy-in from the university? In what department will we house the course? Will students register for the course?

The questions posed during the moment of problematisation served two purposes. The first was implicating "the refugee" in associations of human and non-human actors. In our design meetings, we argued that based on these associations, "the refugee" would become more centred through our pedagogy and students' acts of reading and writing. The second was to tentatively "encode" actors with specific roles and identities. Identities and the allegiances of actors only become more visible through their actions, and these actions shape and adjust the identities of actors during translation. That said, Callon (1984) warns that actors can betray the identities assigned to them in one network for the problematisation of another competing network because they are also tentatively involved, defined and redefined by other networks. In other words, at this moment of the translation process, actors can become 'the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it' (Latour, 2007:46). For example, members of our core team of lecturers were tentatively tasked with researching Humanities students' academic literacy needs, and later with teaching on the course. We also convinced ourselves that the lecturers would support a course where students are taught and acquire the literacy valued by the academy. Furthermore, we argued that the university would support

1 The MOOC was a purely online course offered to a global audience regardless of education background, whereas the 'wrapped' version was contextualised for a local university audience with an in-person and online component.

such a course as it would increase throughput rates. When it came to students, we convinced ourselves that students would see the need for such a course as it would only improve their writing and establish their identity as academic writers - especially those students who did not register for any of the first-year academic literacy courses at the university.

In addition, Minga Kongo, one of the authors of this paper who self-identifies as a former refugee, was tentatively assigned the role of an interviewee, whom we would interview to construct a first-hand account of the cross-border experiences of a refugee. We hoped these episodes would animate the prescribed readings and theories around identity and migration and, in doing so, centre his particular narrative in the formal curriculum. The value of the interview was also that it served as a counterpoint to popular media narratives told of refugees in their absence by centring Minga's story.

### 3.1.2 *The moments of intersement and enrolment*

Callon (1984) argues that the construction of reality is a process that passes through successive states. To "stabilise" one version of reality amongst many others, networks must be tested through a series of trials. Kendall and Wickham (2003) argue that to stabilise a network, translators strive to stabilise the identity of another actor by stabilising their links with that actor, which weakens or destabilises the links the actor has with other actors and other translators from competing networks. However, the translators only attempt to weaken links to other networks if those networks threaten the network they are trying to create, which does not apply in our case regarding Kongo's mobilisation. The actors' identities are defined and stabilised through the network's problematisation, which provides validity to the problematisation, and this is the moment of intersement. Michael (2017:159) defines intersement as the "practices that an actor employs to impose and stabilise a particular identity onto other actors, once their identity has been problematised." Thus, the moment of intersement is inextricably linked to the network's problematisation.

Translators must also be acutely aware that other translators from other networks want to translate actors and assign different identities to them. To increase the success of the moment of intersement, translators often develop or recruit 'intersement devices'. That is, in order to interest actors in their problematisation or to 'corner' the actors, as Callon (1984:211) puts it, translators must construct intersement devices which could be "inserted" between actors and other translators who want to define their identities differently. In addition, intersement devices must also be tailored to suit the needs and identities of specific actors; otherwise, they will not be successful. The moment of intersement requires translators to be overtly aware that other translators from competing networks wish to translate the same actors. Put differently, intersement devices are attempts at establishing a favourable balance of power for a network as it competes for ascendancy against other networks and their translators (Callon, 1984). Thus, during the moment of intersement, competing network associations can be interrupted while another can consolidate and shape its own associations.

Intersement devices alone do not always disassociate actors from other competing networks, nor do they ensure enrolment. Their success is contingent on the translation tactics used during enrolment, the third moment of the translation process. Furthermore, translators must be aware of the potential failures of intersement devices and be prepared to change and employ various strategies to ensure the ultimate aim of intersement, namely, to enrol key actors successfully. According to Gourlay and Oliver (2018), enrolment is a process characterised by actors increasingly taking on their new identities and associated functions

defined through the network's problematisation. To sum up, the moment of *interessement*, where some associations are strengthened and others weakened, is called the 'Triangle of *interessement*' (Callon, 1984). A translator interests actor A in its problematisation, which weakens A's links with other actors; A is then redefined through its associations with the translator and disassociated from other competing networks through the construction and use of *interessement* devices.

In this paper, we highlight the *interessement* devices we used during the moment of *interessement* to achieve enrolment of certain human and non-human actors. These actors included, amongst others, the university, the departments, the readings and the refugee Minga Kongo. In what follows, we highlight how the refugee oscillated between various "degrees of centring" when we recruited specific *interessement* devices. By "degrees of centring" we refer to two levels of visibility of the refugee. The first is where associations between human and non-human actors involve the recruitment of the refugee and make them visible, while the second is where associations "hide" the recruitment of "the refugee" in these associations.

As mentioned, the problematisation of the network was supported by the gap in curriculum provision that became apparent after analysing the interviews that we conducted with lecturers and tutors who taught second-year courses across the ten most subscribed Humanities departments. The interviews revealed that one of the main challenges students faced beyond the first year was that they were required to conduct research and were unfamiliar with the genre of research writing. The lecturers and tutors noted that students do not read or read superficially without applying critical thinking to their text interpretation. On the other hand, students stated that they were overwhelmed with readings and could not complete them or did not know exactly where to focus their attention or how to employ the readings when completing assignments.

These findings informed one of the primary areas of the academic literacy course, namely a focus on teaching reading and research writing practices. The lecturers were unanimous that there was a real need for an academic literacy course to prepare students for their second year of study. These findings were corroborated by the National Benchmark test reports of 2017 onward, which showed that students entering university would require some academic literacy support to succeed in their degree (CEA, 2017).

Subsequently, armed with the findings of the interviews and the NBT reports, we were asked to present our course and its rationale at a university curriculum committee meeting. In the meeting, we argued strongly, by recruiting the interview findings and the NBT reports as *interessement* devices, that the university and students would benefit significantly if our course is officially accepted and included in the suite of courses the university offers undergraduate students. In our presentation to the committee, we focused on establishing a strong association between the two *interessement* devices, the findings of the interviews and NBT reports, and our academic literacy course. The latter was presented as a solution to the findings of the former. In this association between the findings of the interviews and the NBT, the refugee was centred but hidden. However, the refugee became visible when we were asked why the focus was on "the refugee" and identity theory. In our response, we argued, drawing on a social practices account of literacy discussed earlier, that we needed a context, "the refugee" and cross-border migration, to teach academic literacy. Our response centred "the refugee" and thus made him visible. Another strategy we employed was asking the African Studies department to suggest academic readings that we could include in the course.

We saw these readings as intersement devices placed between us and the department to ensure the department's enrolment. In addition, including these readings in the course also created coherence between our course and other courses offered in the department.

We also approached Kongo to share his experiences and their effects on his identity. At the time of the interview, Kongo was already a South African citizen, a UCT student and a part-time staff member. While he showed interest in reflection, he did admit to finding it daunting to arrive at a stable definition of his identity.

*I remember being caught in between and, betwixt, struggling to imagine alternative futures. I was frustrated by my struggles to be part of a society that may not immediately have a place for me.*

His reflections above resonated with one of the course readings, where the author, Woodward (2004), argues that identity is constructed, imagined, contradictory and in flux. This association between Kongo and the readings served to animate the readings we drew on, those from the African Studies department and those we curated on cross-border migration. In this instance, this association between a human (Kongo) and his experiences and non-humans (the readings) and their arguments can be seen as one of the ways the refugee was centred in the course.

Kongo also shared his concern about being centred in the curriculum, lest it might also centre moments of vulnerability.

*Prior to my interview with one of the designers, I was anxious about exposing my vulnerability. I was very cautious not to reveal myself and those I have known in my life. As a result, I intended for this to be a profoundly private and personal experience that I should keep to myself. Otherwise, only my loved ones would later access these readings and disperse them through the history lane to catch a glimpse into my life.*

Thus, to create intersement between "the refugee" (human actor) and us as translators, we identified common areas of interest such as our concern regarding the rise of xenophobia in South Africa and the world. At the time, Kongo was also penning a book manuscript about his migration experience. Furthermore, he wanted his story to be disseminated through a medium other than the written word, and therefore, he consented to the interview to allow his story to travel beyond his context and sensitise students to the issues that "the refugee" faces when crossing borders. Thus, the book became an intersement device for our network of associations between human and non-human actors.

The problematisation of the network, the appropriation of the book as an intersement device, Kongo's story being turned into video format, the curation of academic readings that could be animated through Kongo's experiences culminated in him signing an intersement device, the consent form, which gave us permission as translators to interview and video record Kongo. Translators sometimes need to employ several intersement devices to convince actors that the problematisation serves their purposes and ensures successful enrolment. As we have demonstrated here, and in line with Callon's thinking (1984), intersement devices might be one of several strategies translators could use to 'lock' actors in place and create stability in the network.

Once enrolled, in his reflection, he shared:

*These were the flow of people, capital and goods, pushed across national borders at an ever-greater pace by the forces of globalisation and the growing crisis of xenophobia, racism and citizenship in South Africa. I methodically explained my fate as a former car guard in South African society by focusing on the situation of 'amakwerekwere' who cross borders in flight from political and economic challenges plaguing their native lands of birth.*

*As I moved, I remember entertaining a wide range of expectations. These expectations, desires, or wishes are either fulfilled or unfulfilled. Some are realistic, and others are unrealistic. These expectations should be appreciated and, where possible, managed during a mobility process. As a migrant, I hold views about where I was moving to compared to where I came from. Expectations include desires, feelings, and wishes to be fulfilled or maintained.*

In this reflection, the refugee highlighted the fallacy of the migration 'crisis' in the context of the perpetual movement of people across borders. His expectations, desires, and feelings also emphasised the humanity of refugees and that they cannot be boxed into a single, often vilified category. Kongo perceived his mobilisation, as we will see later on, as a way of relating his experiences to the broader story of *trans humans* and could be regarded here as a spokesperson for other refugees. The enrolment would give presence to his story and that of others, though if taken too far, this identification with the collective could lead to an effacement of the personal. The interview would, therefore, need to equally focus on the peculiarities of his cross-border expedition in a safe and non-intrusive way.

### 3.1.3 *The moment of mobilisation*

During mobilisation, the fourth moment of the translation process, 'enrolment is transformed into active support' for the network (Callon, 1984:218). Mobilisation is achieved through the creation of spokespersons – at times; these could be the translators of the network – who speak on behalf of several actors who have been metamorphosed or transformed into manageable entities that can be transported across contexts with relative ease. Therefore, as Callon (1984) notes, mobilisation is a physical reality due to the complex processes of displacement of actors from one context into another.

Displacements, Callon (1984) argues, are achieved through transforming actors into manageable and mobile entities. One of the ways this can be achieved is by creating immutable mobiles, which includes transforming groups of people into graphs, videos, research findings, policy documents and other texts. The creation of immutable mobiles and their recruitment in networks endorse the legitimacy of the spokespersons who spoke on behalf of several human and non-human actors. Thus, creating immutable mobiles is also an attempt to transport human and non-human actors across contexts. They are the artefacts that aid in translation because they are the 'connection that transports, so to speak, transformations' to other sites (Latour, 2007:108).

Some of the immutable mobiles created include the interview videos with Kongo. These interview videos transported Kongo across time and space into the homes of students, onto online platforms, into the academic literacy classroom and the texts students created. The artefacts originated from two broad categories: theory and praxis. For the theoretical

component, students were exposed to readings and guided reading videos, which they watched before the in-person sessions, as part of our flipped classroom pedagogy to frame classroom discussions. The readings were mobilised after consultation with colleagues in African Studies, where the course was housed. This was part of a conscious effort to align the course to its host department to increase its *raison d'être* within the curriculum structure.

The guided reading videos featured a lecturer interacting with a reading, underlining and encircling key phrases, posing questions and setting activities. The video recording format made them mobile and more manageable to reorder, slow down, speed up or cluster in response to possible shifts in the course curriculum. By the end of the week, students blogged about the readings in light of their experiences with the course content and interactions with refugees and cross-border migration. The central question framing the blogs and assignments was, 'What happens to identity when individuals cross borders?' Here, borders were defined broadly as physical and conceptual boundaries. For the theoretical component, students were also given access to a recording of our interview with Kongo. The interview served two purposes: firstly, to animate the theory, and secondly, to model ways of interviewing a participant in a semi-structured format with ethical considerations in mind.

Like the guided reading videos, the interview videos could be edited to suit the course's purposes, truncating any aspects that may compromise the interviewee's identity and may not be relevant to the aims of the course. The shortened version was just over an hour, and because of their immutable mobile nature, they could be harnessed in different ways and at different times on the course. The interview videos became the nexus between theory and praxis, as mentioned. This nexus also centred Kongo and, therefore, "the refugee". Students could watch them asynchronously as often as they pleased, pause them, take notes, transcribe them, and cite and paraphrase them for their essays. However, to mitigate the 'interpretive flexibility' (Doherty *et al.*, 2006) of the video resource and as a strategy to retain its immutability, Kongo was invited into class to share his story in person and answer students' questions in the last term of the course. It was also an opportunity for Kongo, the refugee, to experience the sensibilities of an audience he was oblivious to during the initial interview. This interaction between Kongo and the class established an association between the refugee, the students and the other non-human artefacts of the network, such as the readings and the spoken and written texts produced during the teaching of the course.

In the classroom environment, Kongo and the students were once more metamorphosed into interviewee and interviewer, respectively. The lecturers, the translators of the network, took on the role of facilitators to ensure that the problematisation of the network was realised by shaping the in-person discussions of the class with Kongo. While Kongo could have mentioned his current experiences, he did not digress from his mobilisation as a former refugee interviewed on a migration course. Hence, most of his statements were reminiscent of his identity as a refugee now mobilised successfully and the past challenges and opportunities that characterised his crossing of physical and conceptual borders. Again, the in-person meeting with the refugee could be viewed as an aspect of praxis. However, as a means to shape and strengthen an association between Kongo as a refugee, the course's readings and the students as academic writers, this was ultimately an aim of the course. This association, which centres the refugees, is captured in Kongo's reflection below:

*Since the course's inception, I have attended numerous classes and have been privileged to interact with students face-to-face. It was the first time that students confronted me with real refugee issues and concerns in such a robust manner.*

Another aspect of praxis was the fieldwork, where groups of students were tasked with interviewing a refugee we had arranged through the UCT Law Clinic. Before the interview, we asked students to imagine the identity of the archetypal refugee. Many of these imaginings depicted someone who is Black, poor and jobless. However, they were surprised to find that the refugees interviewed by each group had a level of agency and engaged in advocacy work to assist other refugees in finding a means of livelihood. While the students were successfully mobilised as interviewers, the refugees saw themselves as interviewees and, in some ways, as responsible for assisting students with their projects. Far from showing despair or vulnerability, the latter broadly defined the terms of engagement in the interviews, thus negating the stereotypical or essentialist views held by the students before entering the course. This experience served the problematisation of the course, namely to sensitise students to refugees and cross-border migration. Part of this sensitisation was to interrogate problematic identity constructions of the refugee.

The write-up of research findings by students was conducted in phases, and each week was dedicated to one aspect of research writing until students produced a consolidated research essay. Here, students had to be mindful of the ethics of research as well as the ethics of representation in terms of how they wrote about the 'other', what they included and excluded, and how much of the 'other' featured in their work as they crafted their bits of evidence into a single academic narrative. We argue that the interactions between students and refugees and the academic writing exercises (tailor-made to interrogate the negative stereotypes associated with refugees) served the problematisation of the network by establishing associations between the refugee, the students, the course content and the academic texts students were producing. These associations in which the refugee was centred also increased the stability of the network.

## 3.2 Second iteration

### 3.2.1 *Revisiting the network of associations*

The central realisation from the first iteration was that the research component of the course was too onerous for a semester-long undergraduate course. Two events called for re-examining the associations established in the first iteration. We, as translators, realised that the interaction with refugees could pose risks both for the interviewer and the interviewee. This realisation was precipitated by news of xenophobic attacks in 2019, which made some interviewees unavailable for interviews. The volatility of the situation highlighted that the pedagogic path we had chosen was strewn with unforeseen perils and could pose a threat to the associations that we had successfully established earlier on. These also impacted students' writing as more time was spent overcoming logistical challenges.

Also, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic threatened to destabilise established human and non-human associations of almost all networks globally. The threat of the virus as a non-human actor made it practically impossible to execute the research component of the course in its second iteration. While the translators wished to challenge the undergraduate-postgraduate hiatus about knowledge-making and expose students to research opportunities, the research expectation needed to be revisited to maintain the associations between human and non-human actors during the first iteration.

In response, we altered the course in ways that endured until the present. We revisited our course objectives. Instead of teaching research as an overt goal, we offered students an orientation to research writing. Thus, we reduced the readings on research and instead embedded discussions on research writing in the drafting moments through weekly Writers Circles. Another decision the translators made was that, rather than sending students out to conduct fieldwork, we would recruit our interview with Kongo as secondary data for students to write about. In doing so, the course no longer had discrete theory and praxis sections as these became interwoven.

We also found that we could not establish a strong association between Kongo's story and some of the readings, and therefore, they could not easily be animated in his story. By removing these readings and focusing on strengthening the associations between the remaining readings and Kongo's story, the refugee gained more centrality in the network. One of the strategies we employed to achieve this was to mobilise and intersperse the case study and the interview with the refugee differently throughout the course. Compared to the first iteration, this required chunking the interview into theme-based episodes that we aligned with the weekly readings and activities. It also resulted in a more reflective yet theory-informed way of writing about the refugee, highlighting the relationality between 'us' and 'them' categories. These are highlighted in the next section with glimpses of the refugee's reflections and the effects of our pedagogy on students.

### 3.3 Critical reflection

#### 3.3.1 *Centring the refugee in the curriculum*

As mentioned, in the second iteration of the course and thereafter, the refugee was centred through the re-mobilisation of his four-hour interview into thematically chunked and sequenced episodes. These have lived beyond the interview and could be reordered and recruited as required. Put differently; the refugee was centred in the curriculum by first refracting his story into constituent parts. This refraction then allowed the distinct parts to be re-aligned with key curriculum moments, which included particular reading and writing exercises to allow the story to find internal coherence within and across the course. These moves ensured the network and its human and non-human associations remained in place.

Since the case study was in the first person rather than mediated by third parties, the videos offered a personal perspective on the consequences of border crossing on identity, allowing the refugee's narrative to counter dominant, marginalising narratives about refugees. Kongo's reflection below captures what this particular curriculum structure afforded.

*Across Africa, there is growing pressure and calls for curriculum reforms. Before thinking about reform studies, perhaps there is a need to re-examine the refugee and migrant content in the university curriculum or, in our case, refugee content in the history syllabus.*

*Being the first person interviewed on the issue of immigrants in this course is a unique privilege. [...] This course is crucial in Clarion's mission to engage students in understanding stereotypes. By doing so, we can dismantle the structures that perpetuate discrimination and inequality in our society.*

*For those outside the course, refugees' and immigrants' stories are often perceived in ways that speak little of endurance and more of loss: narratives of warfare, disease, loss of land, culture and language. Concentrating on such themes has too often depicted immigrants from Africa as powerless victims of history with little ability to chart their futures. However, this course leads us to make space for refugees and immigrants who seek to repair connections across time and place. This course gives us the dimension of doing the same on refugees' experience and history and re-examining the refugee's expertise, pointing out the necessity of bringing forth the voice of those on the margin.*

*Establishing a course such as this means that it is only by first recognising and honouring the challenges of the crossing that we can begin to make space for the possibility of reconciliation in the present. It is a vital project, perhaps now more than ever, and it presents us with an opportunity and new avenues of research.*

*Debating the issue of identity is crucial to making students understand the history of mobility and oppression. It illuminates the many barriers and biases that immigrants have historically faced. While progress has been made in addressing some obstacles, immigrants struggle with many others. When discussing how immigrants are unjustly treated, we must teach our students to understand systemic exclusion and how it manifests in our many societal institutions rather than focusing only on interpersonal acts of exclusion, which has been a common tendency.*

*Therefore, when we teach about identity and belonging, we should provide a platform for students to exchange information about the lived experiences of immigrants. In my case, some immigrants have accomplished and achieved significant milestones in their different fields and professions. It is also an opportunity to highlight how immigrants have been excluded, marginalised and oppressed and how others have struggled to achieve equity and justice. This course creates a platform for students to share their intellectual thoughts, experiences, insights, and reflections on immigrants that have become a pressing concern for South Africa and beyond.*

The refugees' reflections were critical from a pedagogical perspective as they interrogated refugees' stereotypical and prejudiced views, which overlooked more profound structural challenges. The refugee's emphasis on 'systemic exclusion' could be a recommendation for the course's next iteration. The reflections also raised the question of who produces and consumes the story told from the 'margins'. Before this paper's publication, the refugee story's primary audience comprised students who were already deeply invested in the broader concerns of identity politics in the context of border crossing. Thus, the refugee's suggestion to re-examine 'refugee content in the history syllabus', and possibly other curricula, would be an attempt at making visible the 'other' who is very much part of the social fabric, and who shares a dialectic association with those on the 'inside'.

### 3.3.2 *Effects of design on a socially responsive writing pedagogy*

On the course, the refugee was also implicated in weekly writing tasks that required students to apply theories and concepts to the interview videos with “the refugee”. Thus, the refugee story became vital in students’ theorising about the consequences of border crossing. Since this process took place through the written mode, it was less fleeting and more onerous than speech and could be mobilised for more formal tasks on the course, such as academic and reflective essays. As designers or, put differently, as translators of the network, we mobilised writing so that students could explore the links between self and others.

Aligning a personal narrative with academic theories demonstrated that individuals’ brought-along experiences could partly respond or contribute to knowledge-making or theorisation once packaged in an academic genre. Along this line of thought, the blog questions were refined to require students to reflect on the reading in light of the interview videos and their own border-crossing experiences. These blogs culminated in an essay about the consequences of border crossing on identity. A few weeks later, students were required to resubmit the essay in light of feedback, Writers Circle discussions and new readings. The iterative nature of the writing task allowed us to promote ‘talk around text’ (Lillis, 2008) as part of our pedagogy and to re-centre academic writing.

The act of academic writing contained both a ‘re-search’ component in terms of revisiting theory and dominant narratives of the refugee and a ‘me-search’ component in terms of triggering critical thought about how our subjectivities are implicated in the experiences of the ‘other’. The latter component is pertinent to the theme of this paper.

On the first day of class, when students were asked to write about themselves, Jane, an American student,<sup>2</sup> started with a disclaimer, ‘I am American, but...’. She went on to distance herself from what she felt was a perception of xenophobia and islamophobia attached to Americans, particularly post-9/11. Her writing about refugees in the following weeks showed similar self-reflection and critique.

In the case of Angela, a white German student, the course prompted the realisation that while there may be some mutual experience between herself and refugees as ‘outsiders’, they are different because of her whiteness. She explained:

*I think the fact that I am a foreigner in South Africa will also build some communality [sic] between the participant and me, therefore we share an outsider position through being a foreign national in South Africa... I, too, share the position of a foreigner, but my foreignness is perceived and experienced differently than the one of the refugee.*

Over the weeks, a local student, Sinazo, began to invert the media gaze generally directed at refugees to view herself as a potential ‘threat’ to refugees. Likewise, she realised the limitations of discourses of victimhood or crime vis-à-vis refugees. She mentioned in her blog:

*The story of foreign nationals being drug lords and con men and women cannot be the only story that is pushed by the media as it influences and perpetuates a narrative that enables attacks against migrants/refugees to occur.*

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<sup>2</sup> Students have been given pseudonyms

When we interviewed her, she admitted:

*Another thing that creates that conflict within us (is) the fact that identity is not just one thing; it is how you perceive yourself and how others perceive you. And that in itself could be like, limiting because people have this specific identity that they attach to you. Moreover, maybe you do not identify with that.*

The transition from a single narrative about refugees to a desire to hear their stories was echoed by Anthony, another local student. We noted a shift from indifference to a willingness to learn. 'I also had an attitude of "it doesn't affect me, so I won't worry about it". This evolved into "We do not know their stories..." and the need for awareness around "how we engage with them".

What is of significance here is that the course's weekly low-stakes blogs and higher stake essays on the question, 'What happens to identity when people cross borders?' became mobile artefacts triggering students' reflection on their views of refugees, their complicity in perpetuating the single story about them, and their realisation about their symbiotic relationship with the other. Notably, the formative assessment here was an integral part of the course's developmental approach and impinged on the focus and approaches of weekly classroom engagement. Some students' realisations in class and their writing even rippled outward to inform conversations with peers to dispel prevailing myths about refugees. Thus, far from being impervious, the classroom walls allowed for the ebb and flow of ideas — students' brought-along narratives about refugees from their contexts, which were revisited in light of theory and then distributed beyond its borders. It is these enactments that bell hooks (1994) would refer to as 'engaged pedagogy', in other words, the act of participating 'with students as they progress in their lives beyond the classroom experience'. Through the act of writing, these enactments also loop back to the design process to reflect on how the narratives could be recruited further for pedagogic purposes.

Taking this further, by opening the space for various enactments or stories, that of refugees and students, the course strives to diversify what counts as meaningful knowledge, which aligns with the principles of academic literacy as transformative (Thesen, 2015) by signalling that students and the refugee too are contributors in the knowledge-making process. It also sensitises students on various levels regarding how a particular narrative becomes dominant and silences other stories. It raises students' awareness of ways of crafting their writing about refugees so as not to perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices. More broadly, on a social level, it nurtures critical citizens who habitually question dominant representations of the 'other' that can masquerade as facts. Thus, the mobilisation of students' reflective writing in response to the refugee's story implicates the refugee as part of students' academic literacy experience but also allows for a degree of affinity between both to interrogate dominant perceptions of cross-border migration. The students' writing contributed to the network's stability by indexing the course's fulfilment of its dual goal, namely to sensitise students about the issue of cross-border migration and to nurture academic writers.

## 4. Conclusion

In this paper, we drew on actor-network theory to illuminate how creating a network of associations between human and non-human actors produced an academic literacy course. We argued that centring a refugee in this network of associations to various degrees, is critical to promote requisite academic literacy practices and sensitise students about the effects of border crossing. To illustrate this, the design over the first two iterations was carefully unravelled through the lens of Callon's (1984) four moments of translation, namely, problematisation, interestment, enrolment and mobilisation. The aim was to surface the complexities of curriculum design by initiating, establishing and stabilising a network of human and non-human associations and highlighting the significance of the refugee's involvement in the four translation moments. The successful enrolment and mobilisation of key actors – human and non-human – resulted in the practical design of the *Writing Across Borders* course in a manner that allowed it to cohere over time.

The refugee's mobilisation as an interviewee also highlighted the intricacies of border-crossing while offering an alternative to the dominant media narrative of the refugee. This subversion of the dominant story could be a welcome response to Spivak's (1988) question, 'Can the subaltern speak?' The interview was four hours long and was mobilised (Callon, 1984) into a shorter case study video file, later chunked into theme-based episodes to be distributed across the course and time. This mobilisation offered us the flexibility to sequence the episodes and, in so doing, strengthen the associations between human and non-human actors established during translation. This ultimately increased the coherence of the Kongo narrative across the course. In other words, the fragmentation of the interview led to the centring of the refugee throughout the academic literacy curriculum. The critical reflections that followed featured the voices of the refugees, the translators and former students, emphasising moments of recognition between the different actors, mediated by conversations with those on the margins and by acts of writing. Thus, in future, the course could, for example, invite and enrol student volunteers in a podcast about their impressions of refugees in light of the dominant narrative and academic theories. The podcast could then be mobilised into an artefact juxtaposed with the case study narrative of the former refugee, allowing students to compare different perspectives on the migration issue, including their own.

In this way, we have come to view the curriculum not only as a response to the displacement question but also as the beginning of a conversation enabled by creating and revisiting the network of human and non-human actors and implicating "the refugee" in the translation process. As the network stabilised through design and re-design processes, marginal voices like Kongo's could enter prominent academic spaces and challenge the dominant narrative about refugees. Regarding graduate attributes, such courses could be seen as attempts at enrolling students as critical citizens who act from a position of relationality with the other rather than hostility in the current global context.

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