

Lecturer's Views on Using Blended Learning as an Intervention Programme for Teaching English language Academic Writing to Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) First Year Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to seek blended learning as an intervention programme in first year's students' English language academic writing. The 21st century's focus on technology presents an ideal opportunity to use the digital platform as a space for students to learn. This is believed to work well particularly with students who might be struggling with academic writing. It may also apply to students who appreciate not being publicly exposed to the stigma of a struggling student. On the digital platform, they can experience the freedom and space to learn at their own pace and convenience. The study is framed theoretically in the Community of Inquiry based on Bourdieu's structural constructivism theory. The study used the stimuli and synergies afforded by the qualitative interpretivist paradigm that involves a population of 36 people. It used a purposive sampling of six first year English Home Language students and three Intermediate Phase Lecturers. The data were collected through participant observations, focus group discussions and interviews. Thematic analysis served as the analytical tool for the data collected. We believe that this study is of paramount value because it informs and assists the teaching of English as the language of teaching and learning in the classroom to hone academic writing practices of students.

Keywords: Blended learning, Writing intervention, English as Language of teaching, Community of Inquiry, Constructivism

Introduction

Blended learning is an online conveyance of content and teaching which gives the student partial control over time, place and pathway of understanding. This kind of pedagogy is one which allows the student to learn at their convenience. The student then is neither restricted to the classroom nor to the university but also to the virtual space. In light of this, the timetable and the uploaded content gives them the freedom to learn according to their individual needs. The students are also not under strain to learn at the pace of their peers in the classroom. As such, the aim of blended learning writing intervention is to ensure that students are able to write texts independently in the topics they define themselves, by using suitable guidance and the skills gained in classrooms and virtual platforms (Karasu, 2018, p. 116). During the writing of texts, the manner of implementation and duration of the stages vary. This may be implemented through intensive action by the facilitator as a model, or drafts may be written by students individually, after the pre-writing stage is completed. Writing is an essential part of life that plays a vital role in teaching and learning as it is used to gather knowledge (Harris et al., 2013, p. 538).

Given the importance of writing across the curriculum and for academic purposes, this paper seeks to understand and identify barriers encountered in writing for academia. In view of this, the National Department of Basic Education (NDBE) compiled a qualitative analysis

of the Annual National Assessments (ANA) 2011 Results, in which they determined the difficulty in the level of questions and learners' responses in terms of competencies, skills and knowledge (NDBE, 2011). The report reflected that the average score for language and mathematics was 30% and below which is why some form of intervention is required to boost language and Mathematics. Learners had a low competency level in literacy and basic language skills which is why when they enter institutions of higher education, they struggle to cope with the literacy demands. They have poor comprehension skills and are not able to infer meaning nor evaluate questions critically. Also, they cannot write creatively despite being given visuals to stimulate their imagination (NDBE, 2011). Van der Berg (2015) identifies learning deficits across the education system and how these deficits affect the school career. The study identified a distinct gap between children from advantaged and non-advantaged backgrounds prevalent in Grade 4 and that this reflected similarly amongst the grade 12s. Access to university may be pre-determined by grade 4 performance and so interventions based on the ANA results should not be done in Grade 9 as is the case, but it should be done from Grade 4.

The apparent failure of the ANA results means that there is no current language proficiency indicator available to the National Department of Education or its teachers. As a result, no remedial interventions are or have been put in place. This has further resulted in learners with low English language adeptness being given access to Higher Education, who are not necessarily able to cope with the level of English proficiency that is required at this level.

The transition from school to tertiary education

Post 1994, South African higher education institutions (HEIs) became racially and culturally diverse (Pather & Chetty, 2016). The heterogeneous students, with diverse needs and expectations ultimately require HEI's to adapt and address their extreme inequalities in terms of their schooling, race, class, and socio-economic resources (Nelson et al., 2011). In the same vein, Boughey and McKenna (2016) argue that students' understanding of, and how they should adapt to academic literacy, is a pertinent attributing factor in the demeanour they require to transition into HEI. In view of this, Tinto (1993) argues that students can integrate academically and socially at universities if an enabling space is created by the institution. This is suggestive of using any means available and conducive to reducing student's fears and anxiety which in this study is synonymous with blended learning.

To get a better understanding of the context of South Africa, we referred to results from the Benchmark Test Project National Report of 2016, which show that the academic literacy levels of students intending to study teaching are low and that these students have attained only the basic levels of reading and writing due to their poor literacy skills. A major concern that is highlighted in the report is that these learners who envisage studying teaching are ultimately confronted with numerous challenges. One prominent challenge is the lack of preparedness for the rigorous demands of higher education and exposure to technology.

Students pass through stages during the improvement of writing skills. While they are more dependent on their lecturers at the beginning of this process, they gradually improve their writing skills with the facilitator's acting as their model and guide (Tompkins, 2007). Blended learning intends to evaluate the success of teaching students face to face and using the digital platform in recording short videos based on Academic Writing, which are then uploaded on Blackboard, for students to learn at their own pace. Students whose home language is not English are for the most part expected to cope with the demands of a university degree without any intervention from their lecturers (Ravichdran et al., 2017). Although Academic Literacy is compulsory in HEIs, its main objective is improving students' academic writing. However, due to students' tight class schedules, they struggle to find the time to attend classes (Tran, 2013). To turn around this hassle, blended learning should be specifically designed to improve

academic writing in English as the language of learning and teaching in almost all South African Universities.

Students at universities of Technology are known to encounter difficulties to write well and proficiently using academic discourses. Pineteh (2013) justifies that due to their linguistic and language backgrounds, their negative attitudes toward English academic writing becomes an unavoidable occurrence. Although academic discourse practices are not being taught at secondary schools in South Africa, a high proficiency is required from students at tertiary level. Many first-year students fall below the required proficiency level for home language or the language of preference at higher education institutions (DHET, 2017). This can be noticed in first year students' writing at HEIs who struggle to cope with the standard of home language proficiency defined by and required at HEIs. Pineteh (2013) further highlights the gap for multi-modalities and its potential to reach students who are struggling with academic writing. In view of this, very little research has been conducted about enabling academic spaces being created for first year students, transitioning students to practise academic writing skills in order to hone their academic writing practices.

The South African National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12 was developed to equip learners with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes necessary for higher education (DoHE, 2012). According to the Language Policy DoHE (2012), most students who enter HEIs are not fully proficient in the main languages (English and Afrikaans) being used for teaching and learning in higher education. Many first-year students are found to fall below in the required proficiency level for home language or the language of preference at higher education institutions (DHET, 2017). In South Africa, the minimum requirement to pass the National Senior Certificate (NSC) in one's home language is 40%, while the minimum requirement for higher education in home language is 50%. Results from the Benchmark Test Project National Report of 2016 show that the academic literacy levels of students intending to study teaching are low and that these students have attained only the basic levels of reading and writing. A major concern highlighted in this report is that these learners who envisage studying teacher's education are ultimately confronted with numerous challenges, one being their lack of preparedness for the rigorous demands of higher education. This also indicates that secondary education and higher education institutions are not aligned in terms of their minimum requirement to pass home language. Thus, students achieving the minimum NSC home language requirement may either never enter HEI's or they would struggle with the officially designated language of learning and teaching once they enter HEI.

Given that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is a vital requirement in educational institutions in the 21st century, most HEI learning and teaching pedagogies have evolved from traditional face-to-face classes to blended learning that is teaching and learning using face-to-face encounters in combination with online learning. Based on this, it is important that HEIs, not only those based exclusively on a distance learning model, take advantage of the benefits of e-learning to improve teaching and learning platforms. This would help lecturers and students to cope with the increasing demands from higher education and training (Al-Qahtani & Higgins, 2012). Using digital technology in higher education may further augment the effective implementation of curriculum policy as well as create a learning platform in which students are keen to participate and to engage with the content (Waghid & Waghid, 2016). The 21st century focus on technology presents an ideal opportunity to use the digital platform as a space for students to learn, particularly those students who might be struggling with academic writing and who would appreciate not being publicly exposed to the stigma of struggling. On the digital platform they might experience the freedom and space to learn at their own pace.

In May 2018, the South African Minister of Higher Education Naledi Pandor, placed emphasis on the implementation of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the implications that they are likely to have for education (DHET, 2018). The Fourth Industrial Revolution is

progressing at a rapid pace and is set to significantly transform the systems of the world as we know today. The Minister's speech reinforces the need to move forward with the Digital Age. On this basis, our academic writing intervention is intended to take place face to face and on a digital sphere, *Blackboard*. This necessitates that we propose the research question (RQ) as shown below:

How is blended learning currently implemented in the regular teaching and learning to improve first year students writing?

Theoretical framework

Bourdieu (1990) in his *Theoretical Tools* of structural constructivism takes students' integration a level further. He investigates black minority, and low-income students to understand the environments in which they were raised, their cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, and how these influenced their ability to cope with HEI discourses. Pather's study (2016) developed a holistic integrated framework named *the Conceptual Model* by using both Tinto (1993) and Bourdieu's (1990) works. The findings revealed that students' sense of belonging is shaped by the environments in which they are raised. Pather (2016) also identifies the gap between school and the HEI in students' transitioning process and encourages social interaction by building extra-curricular activities into the academic timetable to build and strengthen students' first year transition from schooling to HEIs. Her argument is that, should the transitioning gap be closed, fewer students are likely to drop out.

The above cited position offers a good context for the students under study and in a way clues the lecturers on the way forward. In keeping with the central tenets of with structural constructivism, Hibbert and Foncha (2019); Garrison et al.'s (2000) Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework integrates three elements, overlapping "presences", to trigger and sustain successful educational experiences in HEIs. These elements are:

- 1) cognitive presence,
- 2) social presence, and,
- 3) teaching presence.

Garrison et al. (2001) define the cognitive presence within the Community of Inquiry framework as the degree to which learners can construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and dialogue with one another, and the course content. Garrison et al. (2001) categorised the cognitive presence into a four-phase process of practical inquiry:

- 1) a triggering event, which refers to when an issue or problem is identified and needs to be resolved.
- 2) exploration, which refers to when students exploring the issue both individually and corporately through critical thinking and dialogue.
- 3) integration, which refers to learners moving from higher level critical thinking to developing their ideas; and
- 4) resolution, which refers to when learners apply the knowledge gained in an educational context.

Apart from students reflecting on their own academic writing, the lecturer should create a conducive platform of blended learning in class and on *Blackboard* for the students to use their critical thinking skills by deliberating and challenging one another's academic writing. Collaboratively, students need to develop problem-solving techniques by sharing their opinions and challenges with their peers and lecturer in the classroom as well as online. Students are

required to peer assess each other's work by identifying five challenges that they may be experiencing with writing. The peer then must resolve those identified challenges. The role of the lecturer would be to facilitate this exercise. Spiller (2012) states that students can help each other to fill the gaps in learning and make sense of formal learning. This means that when students discuss content among themselves, they use a simplified way of explaining, one that their peers would understand. For example, the lecturer may discuss the concept of pedagogy and perhaps not all the students grasp the concept. However, when the students are placed in groups there might be one that understood the concept of pedagogy and can explain it to their peers in a simple manner by perhaps saying that pedagogy refers to various teaching approaches. This simple explanation might make the concept clearer for their peers to understand. Orikassa (2012); Cooper et al. (2017) concur that group work creates the space for students to listen to one another and present opinions as they work towards a solution. Based on the above, this study intends to use blended learning as a social space to reduce fear and anxiety in the students where Blackboard comes in very handy. We next propose to address the contemporary debates which we believe will constitute the core of our review of literature on blended learning.

Literature review

Language learning as social practice

Learning through technology has proliferated over the last decade and several studies conducted on technology and learning have proven the opportunities to improve teaching and learning (Bransford et al., 2000). In light of this, the effects of Augmented and Virtual Reality (AR and VR) has motivated language learning (Li et al., 2014). AR and VR are hyponyms for information technologies that enhance the real world with digital tools. Digital environments are created with ARs such as play station games and VRs create platforms for users to engage with each other and access information such as the Blackboard (BB) platform. For years, engineering students have been tasked to work with virtual tools using AR (Martín-Gutiérrez et al., 2010). Similarly, history students could virtually visit historical artefacts and museum via AR (Pollalis et al., 2017), while science students may experiment mixing substances virtually within a safe environment (Sahin & Yilmaz, 2020).

AR has also proven beneficial to language learning (Holden & Sykes, 2011) where students can use AR to navigate their way around a town to find clues of a story. Gadelha (2018) states that VR is advantageous to students learning as they are absorbed in the VR. This helps to reduce distractions that generally takes place in the classroom. Meyer et al. (2019) also supports learning via VR by using videos because students can understand subject matter and how it impacts reality. Bonner and Reinders (2018) mention several other advantages of language learning such as the benefit of mobile learning where the students can move around with their devices and practically study from any location that suits their needs, thus promoting individuality. With the aid of gadgets, students can access information and resources to scaffold their knowledge at their comfort and convenience as well as actively partaking in their learning. This is meant to suggest the importance of blended learning pedagogy and methodologies as a conducive environment for learning.

Asynchronous vs Synchronous teaching and learning

E-learning and distance learning have become prominent in the past years but more so in 2020 when the world experienced the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic, as a result of which teaching and learning was moved onto this platform (Kim, 2020). According to the World

Health Organisation (2020), COVID-19 “is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus” which came to South Africa on the 17th of March 2020. During this period, the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology ordered the early recess of universities and post-school institutions as a measure to contain the spread of Covid-19. The minister further said that universities had to “identify and explore digital online methodologies for teaching and learning” (University World News, 2021). Universities around the world including CPUT were obliged to convert face-to-face classes to online synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning. In order for students to access content and teaching, they turned to the use of multi-modal devices ranging like smart phones, laptops and tablets to be connected. This proved to be a huge problem as several students did not have access to smart phones or other devices at home but remained the only means through which the academic year could be completed.

Ultimately, teaching and learning proceeded via distance learning/e-learning modes. Since academics were new to teaching online during the pandemic, they had to use pedagogy that would have maximum engagement with students. Academics had to decide between using asynchronous learning vs synchronous learning. According to Tuominen and Leponiemi (2020), COVID-19 presence will continue to be a learning experience for the entire educational community. This means, hence forth, academics would need to embrace the online platform as life takes on a new normal in the educational sphere. Asynchronous learning refers to engaging students via e-mail and discussion groups facilitated by the instructor (Buxton, 2014). Later, pre-recorded videos were accepted as well and students had control over where and when they would learn (Griffiths & Graham, 2010; Watts, 2016). Watts (2016) highlights the transactional distance created by online learning as students need to be engage and interact with their peers and instructor.

Blended learning

We believe that the aim of blended learning writing intervention is to ensure that students are enabled to write texts independently in topics that they define themselves by using suitable guidance and the skills gained (Karasu, 2018, p. 116). The term blended learning is also known as e-learning, virtual learning and cyber learning with a brick-and-mortar element which is a teaching and learning space away from home. Blended learning course is characterised by partially being online and partially through various other connected modalities. This is to suggest that, what the students learn online informs what they may learn face to face. Expressed differently, an educational curriculum combines online digital media with the traditional classroom teaching methods. Blended learning is a broad approach, which includes e-learning and micro-learning. The difference between traditional instruction and e-learning is that traditional learning is structured and focuses on face-to-face learning which is teacher-centred. Although e-learning is a structured program as well, it is also student-centred as learning materials are uploaded online and students determine their time, place and pace of learning.

Online learning can be informal and/or fulltime. Informal online learning is when a student uses technology to learn aside the university program by watching educational videos. On the other hand, fulltime online learning is when teaching and learning takes place in a virtual space and not in a classroom. In keeping with the issues and insights we have focused so far, we now refer to the four models of blended learning: Rotation Model, Flex Model, Self-blend Model and Enriched Virtual Model. The Rotation Model is a course in which the students have a fixed schedule when they rotate between online learning and other pedagogies such as face-to-face learning and teaching. The Rotation Model is sub-divided into four categories:

- 1) Station Rotation happens when the students rotate between online learning, face-to-face learning, group activities in class and assignments. In this study, the students moved between the face-to-face learning to working in pairs and then moving onto the online learning on blackboard.
- 2) Lab Rotation happens when the students have a fixed timetable and moves between the classroom and labs to do online learning.
- 3) Flipped Classroom happens when students have a fixed timetable for face-to-face learning in the classroom and have access to the course content online after the university day at their preferred time and place. Students have a fixed timetable and a designated time for the face-to-face teaching of English. In this case, students have access to the online materials at any time. They may choose to use the university computer labs or they may choose to work from their own devices at home and at their own convenience.
- 4) Individual Rotation happens when the students have a personalised timetable to move between learning pedagogies. The Flex model allows the students to have a fluid timetable moving between online learning and face-to-face learning. The Self Model allows students to choose either to do the course online or face-to-face in the classroom. For the Enriched-Virtual model, students move between learning on campus and online. For the purpose of this study, the students made use of the station rotation when they moved from face- to- face learning to working in pairs after they had written the first draft of their assignment. The students also made use of the individual rotation when they move from the face-to-face learning which is in their fixed timetable to a fluid timetable online to watch the videos at their own pace.

The advantages of blended learning are that a student is engaged and in control of their learning. By mixing the traditional classroom with the online classroom, students are interactive and use their senses and skills other than merely listening to the lecturer. The face-to-face interactions followed by the online interaction strengthens the benefits of each other. Knowledge gained in both the traditional and online classroom develops critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Lentz, 2021). We believe that the use of multiple learning platforms allows the students to have access to information in a variety of ways such as videos, podcasts among others at their leisure. Students' knowledge retention improves dramatically due to the interactive elements of the learning process which is the built-in assessment, feedback and practical implementation. Blended learning offers a richer learning experience as students apply what they have learnt and use the feedback given by the lecturer to improve their work (Langer, 2021).

Notwithstanding the points we have voiced in support of E-learning, we are aware that it can be criticised for not allowing students to socialise face-to-face. Based on this, Picciano (2006) says that blended learning bridges the gap between face-to-face learning and online learning. Viewed from this perspective, Blended Learning is an umbrella approach to learning which includes E-learning and several micro-learning approaches. These micro-learning approaches include; Face-to-face learning, virtual classroom, webinars, links, simulations, assessment and one-on-one coaching work (Langer, 2021).

Methodology

For the purpose of this study the data we have used were based on our classroom/Blackboard interactions with the students. As such, we as lecturers provided students with videos and links to videos on academic writing prior to our face-to-face teaching in class. After the face-to-face learning, the students were expected to do their writing assignment which was assessed by us as their lecturers. Once the assignment was assessed, we the lecturers gave feedback to the students during individual consultation and in class with the rest of the students. Thereafter, we were able to determine which aspects of writing that needed to be addressed. Once we had done this, we identified and uploaded short videos about each of the respective aspects on the Blackboard to act like scaffolds to the students. Blackboard became the virtual classroom in which students had the opportunity to learn and engage with us the lecturers and their peers. We again assessed the students and gave them feedback individually during consultation times and in class with the rest of the students. Each of these micro-learning approaches strengthened blended learning. (We hasten to point out at this juncture that this paper forms a part of Ms Lentz Master's dissertation with Foncha playing the role of her supervisor.) The total population of the study included 30 first year Intermediate phase students and two first year IP language lecturers.

Data

The results for this study were obtained through essay writing, reading journal, WhatsApp group chats, short story and discussion group and extracts from student's essays. We also feel that it is necessary to stress at this junction that reading and writing are two sides of the same coin. Based on this, the focus of our teaching is based on how students can read a text and respond to the text which is why the use of literature is needed in the teaching of writing to make it appear as a kind of social practice. Given the enormous amount of the data collected, we have had to make a judicious selection from it which we believe could serve as a representative sampling of it. Moreover, as the collected data had remarkable resemblances and congruencies in it, we believed that such a representative sampling will be tenable.

Essay writing

We asked the students to write a one-page essay introducing themselves about how their teachers impacted on their schooling career and how this made an on the lives of the students. We chose this topic because these are education students. Once qualified, these students would be teaching in communities and have the power to impact and make a difference in the lives of children. We wanted the students to understand the pivotal role they would play in the lives of their pupils, once they qualify and started teaching. We looked at the basic structure of an essay on the blackboard.

We also discussed the writing process as mentioned by the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) Document. In view of this, the writing process involved planning, drafting, editing and re-writing. Students had to submit their essay on Blackboard. This activity was used as a baseline assessment activity to gauge the students' standard of writing. After looking at their essays it was evident that majority of the students were able to perform the task, but their writing still needed improvement. We gave general feedback to all the students about the structure and the use of linking/transitional words. However, these principles were reinforced in every creative writing lesson. For the rest of the lesson, we looked at language and language in education. We looked at the statistics of the official languages in the SA Curriculum and how South African children whose first language is not English are taught in

their home language. The class had a robust discussion about how difficult it is to transition to English from their home language. Below is a sample from a student who scored 70% in a poetry assignment:

First Language 1: English (FEN151S)

8 March 2020

Behind my mask

Behind my mask is an array of emotions even I might not fully understand. I am scared; I am worried; I am a dreamer.

Behind the mask of a calm, collected, mature adult lies a frightened, insecure young woman, that still feels like a child at heart. A young woman who wants nothing more than the comfort of her mother's arms. I want to achieve so much and yet fear has me trapped within its icy grip. I fear failure, I fear disappointing my parents and even more so myself. I am angry that I allow fear to cloud my thoughts and judgements.

Behind the mask of a supportive daughter, cousin, sister and friend is someone who is confused, frustrated and worried. Here is a girl relying so deeply on her faith, praying and believing that things will work out the way they are supposed to, even if she does not see it right now. I want to scream and cry out of anger and pain, that they deserve happiness and not heartache. I want to hold them close and encircle them in a cocoon of warmth and happiness to ward off the grey clouds lurking ahead.

Behind the mask of a patient, enduring student, I desire the future me. The person that has achieved the things I can only dream of at this stage in my life. The person that has her life figured out, that can support her family and lessen the burdens placed upon her parent's shoulders.

Behind the mask of a homebody, lies an aspirant traveller. I long for a different country. A place where there is less suffering and heartache. However unrealistic, I long for it. I long for a place where children can walk safely in the streets and are not forced to grow up sooner than they have to. I want to feel happiness when I think about the world not anger, frustration and disbelief. I want to feel safe.

Behind my mask lies a girl who is trying her best to make it through life, day by day, week by week. A girl who wants to appreciate the small moments in life instead of worrying about whether the big ones will happen. *Behind my mask*, lies so much more and all of it is me.

The essay above shows the student's attempt to analyze the poem by retelling the story the way she/he understands it. Although the student is not critical at this stage, there is evidence that once she/he engages with the feedback from the lecturer, there would be improvement and development.

The reading journal

With a view to facilitating and associating the reading journal, we also taught the elements of a story: characters; setting; plot; themes, as well as reading strategies. To teach the reading strategies, we brought several children's books along to class to demonstrate the application of

the reading strategies. We would take a book and ask students to make predictions based on the title and by skimming through the book or the blurb. We further spoke about how connections are made with a book. We also taught students how to appreciate and evaluate a book. This lesson was important as the students were tasked to write six book reviews on children's books. This exercise was meant to show how students respond to the stories they read and also to provoke critical thinking and problem solving skills. At the end of the lesson, students were given the instruction for the reading journal as well as the rubric, which we uploaded to BB. Students needed to use an A5 Hardcover for the reading journal. Below is a sample of an activity that students were asked to describe choosing a suitable topic.

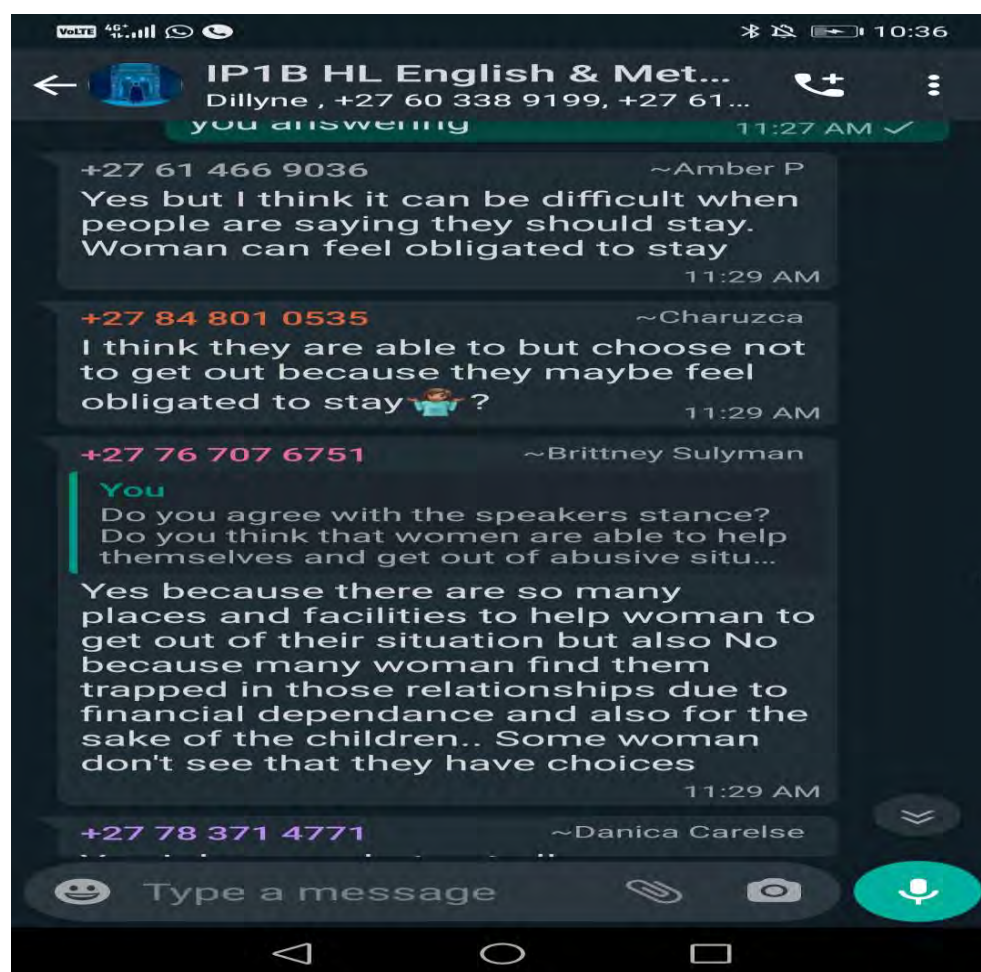


The purpose of the reading journal was to teach students how to summarize, analyze and respond to literary texts. Students had to comment on the structure of the picture by describing what they perceived as well as comment on the setting, characters, key incidents and creative features. Finally, they had to evaluate the photograph by expressing an opinion or judgement.

WhatsApp groups

Information and materials were posted on WhatsApp group chat by us for students to access at their convenience. We did this because during COVID 19, learning was only online and so this platform became one of the easily accessible/affordable by students through their smart phones. Students could ask questions in the group which was answered by us lecturers or by peers. Clarification on these questions helped some of the timid students who would not find courage to ask questions in the group. This virtual platform gave students courage to overcome their fears and also to understand that their fears and anxiety is also shared by peers. Students enjoyed the immediate feedback that they received on the W/A group. During our lecture on W/A, they would answer each other's questions or seek for clarity on what was not understood at first. Although they were not receiving face-to-face lectures, the real time feedback was equally appreciated. Eventually, the W/A platform became a crucial mode for my teaching during the Lockdown because of COVID-19. Needless to say that we used the Blackboard

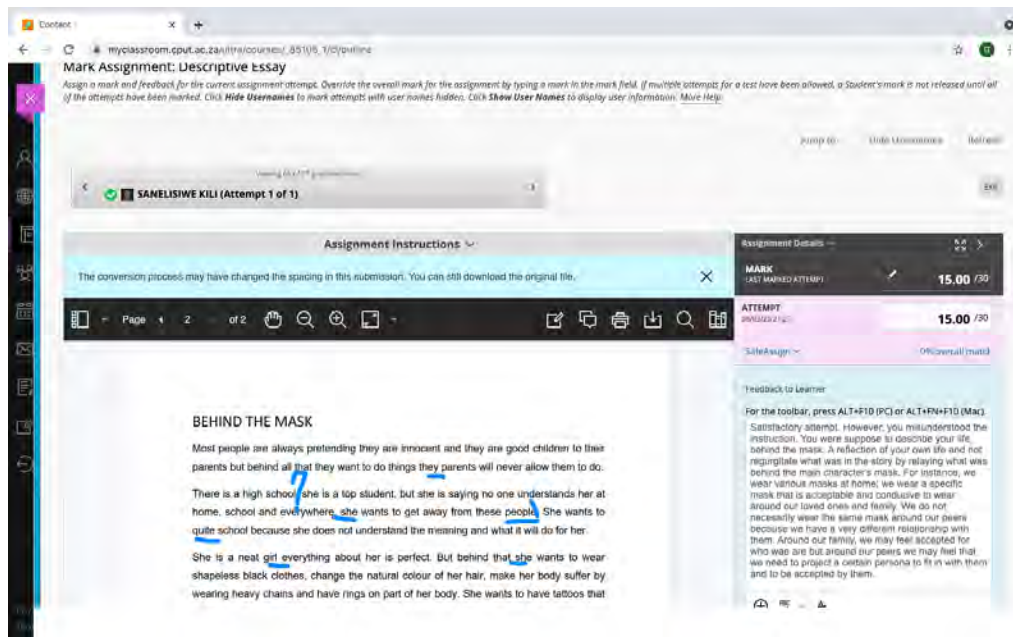
(BB) Collaborate and email also came handy for uploading material and submitting assignments. Below is a sample of the WhatsApp conversation with students.



Based on the data above, the WhatsApp group chat provided a conducive environment for collaborative learning. First year students were able to raise their concerns which were either dealt with by the lecturer or peers.

Discussion groups

In addition to loading teaching materials, we created discussion groups on BB on the left panel with the heading discussions. We later clicked on the discussion and created a discussion group for each week so that students could ask any question that they may have about the content that they may have. Threads would be created with each new contributor. These threads were visible to the whole class and peers could respond to them freely. We as the lecturers monitored the BB for any engagements by sometimes starting a thread with a question to arouse student's engagements and responses. Below is a sample account of the interaction with students on BB based on their assignments.



The students were obliged to submit their assignments through BB which were marked online and feedback also given to them. Again, they had an opportunity to interact with the lecturer and peers

Discussion of Findings

Based on the data findings presented above, there is justifiable evidence that first year Students are only able to structure a basic piece of writing as they were taught in high school. In view of this, first year students need guidance with structuring their writing as they would muddle points in an illogical manner. It is also interesting to note that there were problems with the technical aspects of writing (Orikassa, 2012; Street, 2004). Likewise, our students were able to write their response to the short story, poetry and novels taught in class but needed guidance with paragraphing, structuring and other grammaticality. The data appears to concur with Lillis's (2001) assertion that the skill of academic writing does not come naturally but must be taught and practiced. Needless to say, that if the majority of the students are not assisted, it would affect all their academic subjects, as they need to be competent in writing in all their modules (Costa, 2019).

To make matters worse, it is a common belief among academics that it is the responsibility of language lecturers to teach academic writing. It is in this light that academic writing is seen as collaborative pursuit across subjects to hone the skill in the students. This assertion concurs with the views of Orikassa (2012) who believe that academic development practitioners need to align their research and practices so that students can write well across disciplines. To achieve this goal, blended learning is required as an intervention to polish student's academic writing because it provides a conducive space for the students on blackboard and WhatsApp group chat. We often take for granted that students today know how to use technology because they are constantly on their phones. However, Picciano (2006), observes that the success of blended learning greatly depends on students' access to devices and knowledge of software. By virtue of poor planning and teaching, students learning may regress with the use of technology (Howard, Ma & Yang, 2016). To this end, knowledge gained in both the traditional and online classroom develops critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Therefore, the extension of learning improves the retention of students' knowledge because of interactive elements of the learning process which is the built-in assessment

The inquisition of assessing students' initial writing assignments manifested a struggle with structuring writing and the technical aspects of the English language. In addition, students struggled with critical thinking skills which impacted on their writing skills. Furthermore, students struggled with minimal reading skill which has had a direct effect on how they write. The inquest reflects that first-year students may have a misconceived perception of what academia is and what their contribution should be. This may be brought on by the accepted precedent set at high school. Based on the data findings presented above, blended learning is needed to make first year students understand the importance of structuring their work.

Considering all the advantages that blended learning has presented in terms of learning and teaching, it would do students injustice to solely use traditional teaching methods or virtual teaching and learning only. This appears to concur with the view of Picciano (2006), who asserts that a combination of face to face and online teaching and learning bridges the gap which traditional teaching and virtual teaching present on its own. Unequivocally, blended learning pedagogy has a role to play as intervention for academic writing (Gourlay et al., 2014).

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned points, Translanguaging made students to understand that their own language is important and may afford them the opportunity to assist their peers that may be struggling with the language of learning and teaching. To this effect, Seltzer (2019); Hibbert and Foncha (2019) argue that English should not be taught in isolation from other languages but should present an opportunity for students to be flexible and creative in developing their language proficiencies. Translanguaging celebrates students' diversity and strengthens power relations in class (Wei, 2018). This is to suggest that Translanguaging gives students the opportunity to respond to the short stories, novels and poems that they read as literature text in class. This concurs with the argument that all languages need to build stronger relations between lecturers and students (Wei, 2018). As such, Translanguaging seems to align with the CPUT's Language Policy that the institution must create a multilingual environment that promotes the institution's unique African identity, conducts inclusive teaching and learning and address the historical injustices (CPUT version 0.1, 2019).

Conclusion

It is apparent that majority of our non-English language students are challenged by the English Language policy of the institution because several students cannot participate in class discussions and critical debates. In addition, the level of their written language exercises is a strong indication that these students are severely hampered not by their intellects, but by their inability to think, process and meaningfully write in a language that remains foreign to them (Foncha et al., 2016). The acknowledgement of this fact is what has motivated us to carry out this investigation with the hope to come up with the suggested blended learning interventions that may pitch first year students to the level of Higher Education.

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