CHAPTER 11

Reflecting on the online teaching space as a 'boundary object' in pandemic times: Making the invisible visible in an academic literacy course

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Abstract

The havoc wreaked by the Covid-19 pandemic compelled drastic reconfigurations of teaching and learning. Before Covid we used blended modes of course delivery successfully for our academic literacy course. The shift to a fully online mode in 2020 led to streamlining teaching content that would cater for the lowest denominator, while *not* compromising on quality and course objectives. Despite institutional provisions to equalise technological access, the playing field remained uneven. That said, for the first time, our pedagogy was largely visible online, available beyond the class time through our designated online learning management system (LMS), called Vula. Across various contexts, Vula connected students, staff, and the university, who found themselves participating in emergency remote teaching mode. The Vula site became a doorway for us to reclaim our agency in the academic project, in attempts at making the invisible visible. Despite Vula's distinct identity, it was amorphous enough to be

recruited in various ways by academic literacy practitioners. Beyond its conventional function as a notice board, the Vula chat room became a place where they could gauge students' understanding of content and assignments, and a 'chalkboard' to emphasise theoretical concepts. Considering Vula's heterogeneous uses, we started to see Vula as a 'boundary object,' described by Star and Griesemer (1989) as objects that have a high degree of interpretive flexibility, and which are used by different people across different contexts. The multiple ways in which we harnessed Vula as a 'boundary object' allowed us to interrogate our emerging sense of becoming and revealed our multiple roles as academic literacy practitioners. A principle known as the 'looping back mechanism' created some form of coherence across these uses. Looking ahead, the symbiosis between Vula and its participants, and its affordances in terms of our academic literacy pedagogy, invite us to critically reflect on how we harness this boundary object in physical and blended teaching modes in future.

Keywords: boundary object, online, LMS design principles, academic literacy pedagogy, looping back mechanism, critical reflexivity, becoming, teacher identity, blended learning

Introduction

In 2020, the turmoil triggered by Covid-19 urged abrupt reconfigurations of teaching and learning in South African higher education (HE) from face-to-face and blended learning models, to fully online. Within this context, "students and staff are being asked to do extraordinary things" (Hodges *et al.* 2020: 18). As an entire university shifted to an Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) mode, and rapidly re-orchestrated its core educational activities on its official learning management system (LMS) Vula, academics from various disciplines began to

interpret and appropriate the online site in heterogeneous ways across disciplines. In terms of its purpose and function, we realised the central role Vula played in transforming our thinking about teaching and learning. Vula became not just a substitute for our in-person classroom interactions, but it came with its own affordances, such as acting as a chalkboard, a slide projector, a blog space for reflective learning, a noticeboard, a gradebook, a workbook, and an assessment tool, amongst others. These multiple affordances, located in the same space, heightened its role in mediating and facilitating teaching and learning experiences across academic and home spaces. Our exploration into theorising the role of Vula on our course, led us to consider it as a 'boundary object.' Star and Griesemer (1989: 388) and Bowker and Star (2000: 297) refer to objects that have a high degree of interpretive flexibility and which are used by heterogeneous actors across a range of contexts, as boundary objects.

In this chapter, we as academic literacy practitioners, reflect on how we acted upon the Vula site and how it acted upon us through our evolving design principles and pedagogy. The processes of acting upon the boundary object and it acting upon us are mutually constitutive and have also contributed to our sense of becoming as academic literacy practitioners.

Academic literacy practitioners in the university

We are located in the Academic Development Programme (ADP) at a historically white university in South Africa (SA). The ADP has a clear redress and social justice function in this setting, that of equipping academically under-prepared historically disadvantaged students with the means to succeed at university (Academic Development Programme 2021; Pym and Paxton 2013). We teach academic literacy at the

reception-year and consider ourselves seasoned academics, who have over the years, developed sophisticated, innovative and evolving curricula, responsive to the increasingly diverse needs of students entering the politicised HE landscape in SA. Before Covid-19, we were already using blended teaching modes quite successfully in our teaching. We were becoming familiar with the possibilities of blended learning, which we were eager to explore from within the comfort of our computer-based teaching laboratories. Then Covid-19 struck, abruptly ushering us to a remote online environment.

As academic literacy practitioners, our transformative mission as described above, had to remain an integral part of our shift to teaching online. Initially, this shift ushered in a crisis mode that necessitated a streamlining of our teaching content that would cater for *all* students without compromising on quality, which meant continuing to utilise an ethics of care approach in our teaching, creating a conducive learning environment and recognising and acknowledging the multiplicity of our students (and also our own) voices in this new space. This was a tough ask in an online context, where the majority of lecturers and students were entering fully remote online learning for the first time.

In attempts at sustaining the university's core business, over 20,000 students migrated to Vula. Institutional surveys reassured the university that about 90% of the respondents were technologically equipped in terms of data and devices, though course statistics revealed that 30% of our students alone would fall behind if the university did not intervene to equalise access. While the university tried its best to level the playing field, new challenges came to the fore, reminding us of Spivak's (2014) words that "statistics are useful but existentially impoverished" and seldom reflect the magnitude of various experiences.

Bearing in mind the need to offer a course that remained inclusive, especially in the face of socio-economic disparities and a likely digital divide, our roles as academic literacy practitioners during ERT, reminded us of two things: (a) that "Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world. Not just the result of cognition, learning involves the integrated functioning of the total person - thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving" (Kolb & Kolb 2005: 194); and (b) that "Transformative learning... is a cyclical process of being and becoming" (Natanasabapathy and Maathuis-Smith 2019: 373). The adaptation to fully online engagement signalled a drastic shift in our thinking about *how* our roles as responsible, innovative and caring practitioners could be translated in the online environment so that learning could continue meaningfully and holistically.

The Vula site as a boundary object

Bowker and Star (2000: 297) argue that boundary objects are "both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites". To emphasise their trans-contextual nature, Bowker and Star (2000: 297) argue that boundary objects are "weakly structured" trans-contextually, but "strongly structured" in local use. Therefore, actors who handle boundary objects in local use where they are strongly structured are 'near-sighted' and consequently understand the object better in its local use than its function trans-contextually (Gomart and Hennion 1999: 238). Our understanding of the boundary object and its trans-contextual nature can be extended by seeing it as a 'fractal' - a line in mathematics located in more than one dimension. Law (1999: 11-12) describes the fractal as "[...] always *more than one and less than many* [s]omewhere in between" contexts. This

reference to a 'fractal,' allowed us to interrogate more in depth, the complexities of purpose and meaning taking place in multiple contexts joined by the same online platform.

In keeping with the 'fractal' nature of the boundary object alluded to above, Brown and Capdevilla (1999: 40) refer to an object's high degree of interpretive flexibility as an inherent "functional blankness". They argue that it is the object's "*lack of meaning*, or to be more precise, what the object fails to say" (1999: 40), that could be a source of incoherence for those recruiting it in a particular context. They suggest that the identity of an object, such as Vula, "must be formally indexed" (1999: 41) or imbued with meaning and function to account for its functional blankness and its "in between-ness" (Law 1999: 11-12). Bearing this in mind, the design principles informing the course's pedagogy, such as teaching writing in context-specific ways, offering multiple drafting opportunities, eliciting students' life histories through their engagement with core concepts, and being inclusive, were all examples of the local use of Vula on the course, all of which served to negate its plasticity and functional blankness trans-contextually in the university. These design principles underpinned our common pedagogical interests and sought to bring a degree of stability and coherence to the Vula site. This, in turn, had consequences on our sense of becoming in our roles as academic literacy practitioners.

We now look retrospectively at how we 'formally indexed' the Vula site during our transition from a blended model course to a fully online model of delivery, to account for Vula's functional blankness. We consider how Vula, as a boundary object with particular affordances, shaped and affected our academic literacy pedagogy. In addition, we problematise how the Vula site served as another mirror, alongside the

face-to-face classroom, to reflect our pedagogy back to us - a pedagogy that we have come to theorise over the last few years since the course's digital turn.

Acting upon and being acted upon by the Vula site as a boundary object

Acting upon the Vula site, in other words, formally indexing it during the pandemic, required us to pay attention to our existing design principles since the digital turn in 2014 and to furthermore consider the affordances of the 'boundary object' itself. With the digital turn in 2014, we had harnessed Vula to favour a blended model that would foster the 'analytical mode' in students' interactions with concepts and academic literacy on our course (Arend *et al.* 2017). Since then, the blended model underwent cycles of redesign requiring a refinement of design principles, such as teaching writing in context-specific ways, offering multiple drafting opportunities, eliciting students' life histories through their engagement with core concepts, and being inclusive. Such refinement allowed the course to leverage on Vula's affordances and to be continually aligned with course objectives on one hand, and students' habitus (Bourdieu 1977) and evolving needs on the other.

The move to full online mode created new design considerations and principles, but also new dilemmas. At the institutional level, before the pandemic, Vula had conventionally served as a resource portal, where students would access readings, announcements and submit assignments. However, during the pandemic, rather than complementing or extending classroom interaction, Vula became the main site for synchronous and asynchronous teaching through online lessons and live classes.

With the inequality of access in mind, it became clear that we needed to factor in students' socio-economic backgrounds and design our online course to promote *innovative* teaching and *inclusive* education, to cater for *all* students, as alluded to earlier. Initially, this created discomfort among staff around whether the use of basic technology might hamper the quality of our offerings and reflect negatively on us. While the concern was legitimate, it was soon superseded by an ethics of care prerogative (see Samson *et al.* 2018), where *what* was being taught became as critical as *who* was being taught.

Additionally, as academic literacy practitioners cum-course-designers, we needed to acknowledge what Vula afforded, rather than seeking to replicate the face-to-face classroom online. That said, the Vula site also morphed based on how participants interacted with it, its artefact, and other participants. It thus reflected the three characteristics of space that Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith (1991) depict as follows (translated): 'perceived space' (the infrastructure), 'conceived space' (the imagined space) and 'lived space' (the performative space). The boundary object as the 'lived space' was a dynamic response to the momentary confluence of minds and actions of participants across spaces and had 'interpretive flexibility' that enabled it to remain relevant to diverse but intersecting experiences.

As a point of intersection between the academic and home spaces and their varied experiences, Vula blurred the boundaries of what constituted the university, making it as amorphous as the online space that was now its double. The intersection led to novel ways of harnessing the online space to further the educational project, rather than merely serving as a resource portal. It also reconfigured the teacher-students rapport by flattening hierarchies generally enforced through the classroom's physical arrangement.

The “in between-ness” of the Vula site became apparent in the way it was recruited on our course and therefore raised questions about how we could create coherence using the site. Law (1999: 11-12) argues that the heterogeneous ways of using boundary objects require “drawing things together without centering them” in order to create coherence between users and contexts (author’s emphasis). Our attempts at ‘drawing things together’ involved building on and merging the ideas of academic literacy practitioners and learners in a developmental and dynamic way in the online space, so that learning was not linear but rather, as stated earlier, holistic and cyclical. By studying the ways in which Vula is recruited to teach academic literacy, we have noticed two salient features. The first was that new academic articles were often reworked by academic literacy practitioners into a “guided reading” with annotated notes aimed to interactively involve students with the new knowledge. This required practitioners and students to draw on their autobiographies and past conceptual knowledge gained on the course. Secondly, new knowledge was then connected to previous autobiographical and conceptual knowledge through writing activities in the chat room between students and practitioners; and the writing of blogs and essays.

The affordance of the Vula site made these two salient features more visible and allowed us to question our attempts to create coherence between our heterogeneous ways of recruiting Vula; between us and students’ prior and new knowledge; and between various spatial contexts. We have come to call the principle that underpins these two salient features the ‘Looping Back Mechanism’ (LBM) of the course. As the LBM allows us to “draw things together without centering them” (Law, 1999: 11-12), it allows for various possibilities of becoming

amongst us. The LBM, as a subset of our design principles and academic literacy pedagogy, therefore gained more visibility online.

Additionally, in many instances, with the move to a fully online mode, Vula *acted upon us* as designers and ushered the need for re-design and innovation in conjunction with online teaching practices themselves. The impetus for re-design could be seen as an affordance of the functionally blank boundary object. Since we were trialling aspects of online design while teaching, adaptations to the design often occurred within the same semester that we were teaching, thus we witnessed teaching and design in a dynamic relationship. At times, students' experiences turned into learning moments for us, such that our design and teaching became responses to their diverse contributions and locations. A case in point were the blogs where students recruited their identities and experiences to grasp theory and make it theirs. The act of writing became a way of formally indexing the boundary object by (re)writing oneself into being (Hunma *et al.* 2019), especially in the online space where teacher and student identities would otherwise be reduced to a name or number. The blogs allowed us to acquaint ourselves with students' identities, their habitus, how they grappled with new concepts, how they revisited their positions through the lens of theory, which in turn became entry points for forthcoming live classes.

Another innovative practice was the use of the Vula chatroom for live sessions and as a 'chalkboard' for notes that anchored emerging or critical ideas on the course, and students' responses to those. Interestingly, since writing was the main mode of communication in the Vula chatroom, students expressed their evolving understandings of concepts in the written mode right from the start. For a writing course,

the written mode of interaction in the chatroom now became a beneficial way of gauging not only students' grasp of concepts but also their ability to articulate these in prose, and our ability to use these instances as teaching moments.

The blog and chatroom affordances here were stretched beyond what may have been originally anticipated by the Vula LMS developers, though for our purposes, it was aligned with our course objectives. These examples underscore how, due to its 'functional blankness,' the boundary object was largely capable of taking on new roles, sometimes undergoing trial by fire to accomplish the new challenges assigned to it. In fact, the design-teaching dynamic ensured a continual attempt at relevancy, becoming a way for academic literacy practitioners to imbue the boundary object with particular meanings and purposes within a particular context and time. This dynamic dispels the myth that the online mode would lead to automation and the redundancy of academic literacy practitioners, but rather, it makes visible their role in harnessing the online space for particular pedagogical ends. In the past, we only had glimpses of each other's interactions with students through marking each other's essays and our weekly staff meetings. With a shift to a fully online teaching mode, after formally indexing Vula with design principles which in part were informed by our pedagogy, we realised that this process now also meant that Vula acted upon us by shaping our interactions and impelling us to revisit our design on the platform. In the next section, we discuss how Vula acted upon us as academic literacy practitioners in terms of our sense of becoming.

Sense of becoming

The online pedagogy, particularly the LBM, became important for reflecting on our individual and collective online teaching experiences

sparked by Covid-19. Through it, we traced the highly emotive threads of initial shock, dread, isolation, discomfort, heightened caution, experimentation, frustration, growing awareness, recognition, innovation, optimism, acceptance and reconciliation, which comprised our journeys to online design and pedagogy. These *affective attributes* extensively formed part of our reflective engagements. For professional growth, it became important to consider how "an attunement to the affective forces circulating in pedagogical practices" (Bayat and Mitchell 2020: 57) could enhance our understanding and realisation of Kolb & Kolb's (2005) earlier claim, that "learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world".

We realised that amidst our isolation, the "affective forces" at play were vital to our continued growth as caring academic literacy practitioners. We were forced to reflect critically on our discomfort of operating within a space where we were not physically present *but* where we were expected, nonetheless, to make our presence, authority and leadership felt by managing and facilitating the learning process. These reflections, borne out of necessity, were insightful, and became an important lens through which to (re)view our own processes of "being and becoming" (see Nomdo, Hunma and Samson 2021). Our holistic teaching framework represented a dynamic entity, something in process that created possibilities within us, for shifting from one state of realisation to another. This interplay between our sense of being and becoming is aptly captured in the claim that "being itself signifies a particular ontological presence at a particular point in time, whereas becoming is a continuous moving presence of the ontological… self" (Natanasabapathy and Maathuis-Smith 2019: 371). The LBM we were using, became a means to trace the nature and extent of our professional and personal growth. It allowed us to adopt a particular

reflective gaze on our past experiences and knowledge, while simultaneously enabling us to act on, reinterpret, and develop new ways of knowing about that same event. Utilising Vula as a "boundary object" therefore means that the knowledge we gain from our present online interactions, can be used to revisit and rewrite past knowledges which in turn became lenses for imagining newer and more creative future possibilities. The interplay between the LBM and Vula as "boundary object," therefore, allowed us to connect with *both* the temporal and spatial locations of our experiences.

Vula's connective capacity symbolised the substitute, the alternative to the full-contact university that was being denied its normal functions and operations. Vula became our *quarantine* space. It symbolised *the* emergency assembly area; a necessary place of safe seclusion for faculty and student evacuees in reaction to the state-imposed restriction of physical movement brought on by Covid. Vula represented *a virtual space of waiting* until the tangible outside world became inhabitable. But as a virtual space, we realised that Vula's boundary-ness worked differently. While it functioned to keep us 'inside' for core business, it simultaneously connected *all* of our separate physical locations, mediating access into, around, and outside of its virtual confines in multifaceted ways. Thus, as a "boundary object," Vula's role is reified here as that which has a high degree of interpretive flexibility that could be used by different people across a range of contexts. It was a gateway to much more than we had imagined. While acknowledging Vula's gateway capacity, we also realised the heterogeneous nature of student experiences which gained access through it. These experiences, not unlike our own, were tinged with caution and fear of the unknown. However, there were also elements of optimism, curiosity, and excitement about the *new* that unfolded in this

unfamiliar space. We learned the hard way that the merging of our teaching content and online 'voices' with what students decided to offer of themselves here, was not a seamless process, despite students' familiarity with social media platforms. We discovered quite vividly that the merging of content with various 'voices,' was tainted with discomfort and veiled promise. We realised that the online teaching space is where students and academic literacy practitioners grapple with their online presence, with each trying to develop a relational 'voice' that can be heard and made visible through the medium of writing, to enable us to 'see' each other *beyond* the surface.

As we reflected on these struggles to make our 'invisible' selves 'visible' through the act of writing, we were struck by the importance of social interaction and how we had taken it for granted pre-Covid. We could attest to, via the LBM, how social interactions in the physical classroom facilitated the mobilisation and realisation of our and our students' sense of agency in relation to each other. This relational component in the construction of identities (Woodward 2004) is *part* of the content we use to teach academic literacy. We were, therefore, aware of how such physical interaction led to growth and development and made possible the realisation of *other* possibilities of 'Being,' in the Heideggarian sense (see Nomdo 2015; Nomdo, Hunma and Samson 2021). Dealing with such complexities in a writing course that uses identity theory as teaching content, necessitated critical introspection of the design and implementation of our pedagogy online and on how we could try to create meaningful learning in digital spaces where students could discover, question, explore and interrogate their identities in relation to others.

Viewing Vula as a 'boundary object', enabled self-interrogation of the form and function of our pedagogy, and shifted our understanding of

Vula as a flat space to one that was multidimensional and which embraced the crossing-over between worlds, increasing visibility. This allowed the similarities, differences, and discomfort we discovered, to become generative. It enabled us to view Vula as a space which possessed its own agency (Bayat and Mitchell 2020: 62-63), because as we acted upon it, it reciprocated and acted upon us. As a "boundary object" Vula possessed "agentic" qualities (Bayat and Mitchell 2020) that were realised through its interaction with humans. Our encounter with Vula has therefore allowed us to embark on a journey of self-discovery where we meet up with and realise *other* versions of ourselves as practitioners and care-givers, but also as receivers of care (Tronto 2010). Our sense of professional development thus grew out of our vulnerabilities and is aptly captured within the "cyclical process of being and becoming" (Natanasabapathy and Maathuis-Smith 2019: 373). This reinforced our realisation that, "[c]ooperation does not always follow from a pre-existing consensus but can be achieved with objects flowing through various....social worlds" (Timmermans 2015: 4). In this way, the affordances offered by Vula as a 'boundary object' are organic and remain in a dynamic state that constitutes an iterative process in which the horizons of multiple participants and spaces are merged and realised in ways that are never complete, and always in the process of *becoming*.

Way forward

Having employed a "boundary object" lens to critically reflect upon our abrupt shift to online remote teaching, we ask: How do we harness the affordances of the "boundary object" for developing and assessing future pedagogies? How does this impact the future of classroom practice? Our thinking now is that a post-pandemic world might well

result in a return to physical spaces. That said, the recruitment of the online space as part of the resources supporting our pedagogy is here to stay, and encourages a blended teaching approach. This is in line with our institution's 2030 vision (Swingler 2020) where digitally enabled (blended) education has been given prominence. Our online teaching experience has made us more receptive to the flexibility of the design-teaching dynamic. This entails appreciating the resources developed during ERT, and the ways these can evolve to respond to students' participation from diverse locations. This would better prepare us for the future challenges that awaits the world of HE. By viewing context and content as folded together, we hope to fulfil the academic project in socio-economically relevant ways.

Vula and other spaces

What has been invisible in the face-to-face is becoming visible in the online space. We foresee employing more innovative and multi-pronged approaches to using the boundary object as a visible record of teaching practices and its effects. This visibility may enable a broader scope of critical reflection and introspection for academic literacy practitioners and students in terms of how they engage with blended curricula and how this fosters holistic growth. Such student-centred design-teaching structures will set in motion spirals of (re)thinking, (re)imagining, and (re)designing that are highly responsive to the evolving HE contexts.

As academic literacy practitioners, we have come to realise that the "boundary object's" reliance on writing as the main mode of classroom interaction, has left students with no alternative but to *produce texts* in order to communicate their thoughts. This is a welcomed spin-off of the reflective blogs on Vula where students revisit their experiences in light

of theory. This establishes a particular method of inquiry that could be continued in the blended teaching mode to give academic literacy its due place in the academy. The LBM allows us to view students as producers of knowledge (Nomdo *et al.* 2021), a premise that allows us to move away from assimilatory approaches to valuing students' voices through various writing genres, thereby facilitating a process of negotiation in meaning making. This challenges the structures of formal assessment to incentivise more reflexivity in students' writing and to view tasks as part of ongoing portfolios, rather than as discrete units. The online space has allowed for such flexibility, impacting how we view deadlines as learning milestones *rather* than instruments of compliance.

More broadly, flexibility influences our approach towards the student cohort. In fact, a core building block of our practices rests on constructing an ethics of care into our interactions with students. While care was always part of our pedagogy, the pandemic has highlighted stark socio-economic disparities that require a more human approach to the execution of educational activities. Our pedagogy of care *must* continue to promote the fight for social justice. Here, discomfort is viewed as an aspect of care. Essentially, innovation and inclusivity are two ends of a scale, where the appeal of innovation needs to be balanced with the reality of unequal access. Inclusivity requires deliberate efforts to leverage online spaces for transformative purposes. Here, transformation relates to social, epistemic, digital, and existential access. While the online space may have had some constraints in this aspect, blended teaching in future could compensate for this shortcoming.

Taking a step back, Vula, as a boundary object, does facilitate the university's capacity to view students more holistically. We see how the

university's reach is continually expanding beyond its physical context, creating new spaces for cross-institutional collaboration regionally and globally. This again reinforces the boundary object as scattering and "bringing together objects without centering them," making visible how the globally dispersed fractals of the university start to cohere through trans-contextual pedagogical principles and situated practices.

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