

**The critically reflective practice of online educators: Constructing
a dialogic pedagogy in virtual learning environments.**

by

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Abstract

Freire's notion of dialogical pedagogy, where the student and teacher mutually grow and learn together and provide opportunities for personal and social gains, assumes the development of deep and meaningful dialogue in the learning environment. The virtual learning environment poses an interesting challenge to this notion, whereby dialogue is constrained by time lags in communication over discussion forums, blogs and even over email. Successful online courses must, therefore, go beyond technological changes only, and require teachers to commit to pedagogical changes while transitioning from a classroom environment to an online environment. By gathering qualitative data from educators who have recently transitioned from face-to-face to online teaching at New Zealand tertiary providers of education, this study develops an understanding of how online educators pick cues from the discussion platforms offered by virtual learning environments to critically reflect on their pedagogical practice, and the associated changes they make to help students achieve their learning outcomes. It critically assesses how dialogic pedagogy and critical reflection can be adapted to fit in the framework of virtual learning, and contrasts these philosophical ideas to the Western criticism of automation and de-professionalisation of universities in the wake of increased distance learning options provided by tertiary institutes. The findings have been discussed within a post-intentional phenomenological framework, which focuses on what structure the phenomenon might take rather than what it already has. The findings from this dynamic inquiry will help online educators develop deeper understanding of the ever-changing nature of social, ethical and political relations in an online context.

The philosophical underpinnings of this research assume critical reflection, as popularised by John Dewey, and dialogical pedagogy, developed by Paulo Freire, to be compatible concepts. Developing critically meaningful relationships with students, through dialogue, complements critically reflective practice. A healthy dialogue between the teacher and students, where each is encouraged to actively engage in discussions and amend or revise their views about various aspects, can make the process of reflection more productive. The virtual learning environment does not offer the same promptness and flexibility that is there in the conventional, face to face context. Developing this personalised relationship with students, and limited space for conventional dialogue, can act as a challenge for online educators to critically reflect and make relevant pedagogic adjustments.

The findings from this study reveal that the prior teaching experience of educators in a face-to-face environment can help them in critically reflecting on their pedagogy as they move towards an online teaching and learning environment. With students shying away from engaging in dialogue in the online environment, educators resort to finding alternate ways to keep students engaged with the online tasks. The motivation of the education institution for transitioning to the online environment, and whether they keep the educator's feedback on-board as they make this transition, also determines how 'present' and actively engaged educators themselves will be in the online learning environment.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Preface

I taught Economics at the undergraduate level for approximately ten years, during which I was teaching in conventional, face-to-face classrooms. As a fresh graduate, when I started teaching students who were in the third or fourth year of their Bachelor degree, I was barely two or three years their senior in age. The students perceived me more like a teacher's assistant than being their actual teacher. This made me adopt a very defensive approach in class, and rather than being open to discussions, I preferred a lecturing style, where I would stick as close as possible to what I had on my PowerPoint and tried to be the only one talking as the students listened and took notes. Each class session lasted for two hours and twenty minutes, so taking a break midway was a norm. During these breaks, students would come to me and start a discussion about any random subject, ranging from the weather, to a new movie that had been released, to what had been discussed in class during the first half of the session. These conversations allowed me to start fostering relationships with my students, enabling me to loosen up in class. I soon began to realise that lecturing was not the best way to keep students engaged during my sessions.

The random conversations that I had with my students helped me in two ways. First, they made me *think* about the pedagogical approach I had chosen to adopt (which conformed more with lecturing), and how it was not the best way to keep my students engaged (I have deliberately used the term 'think' and not 'reflect' on my pedagogical approach, since I had not been through any formal teacher training and therefore, was not aware that such a concept even existed). This thinking back, or reflecting, had been made possible due to the dialogue that I was having with my students. Secondly, as my relationship with my students grew stronger, I dared to allow them to speak in class and voice their own opinions, even if it meant challenging what I had said. The to and fro of dialogue between us helped us develop new meanings, allowed us to become more receptive to the opinions of others, and consequently my students became more engaged in our sessions.

As I continued teaching in these conventional classes, I developed a style of teaching in which dialogue with my students started playing a central role; this allowed me to get to know my

students better. During the last two years of my professional journey, I ventured into teaching in a blended learning environment. I was the local tutor for an external degree being offered by a university in the United Kingdom to students in Pakistan. This meant that I had to work as part of a team with the external tutor in the United Kingdom. Every week, I would have a two hour face-to-face session with the students, while the external tutor would have a one hour session with them, which was video-streamed live from the United Kingdom. I noticed dissatisfaction among the students about their online sessions, since they were not able to communicate with their external tutors as well as they would have wanted to. The online sessions were often marred by technical issues and connectivity problems, as a result of which dialogue was not as free-flowing as it would be in a face-to-face session. The students would also not be as engaged in the online classes, and questioned the value of the degree they had paid for. With the students voicing their opinions and dissatisfaction with me, I wondered if the lecturers also had similar concerns. This motivated me to find out more about the voice of the educators, and consequently, formed the basis of this research.

Background

Critical reflection

In the context of how the term ‘reflection’ is used in my research, the Oxford dictionary describes it as a ‘serious thought or consideration’, and as ‘an idea about something, especially one that is written down or expressed’ (Reflection, n.d.). The published literature also offers several definitions of reflection, and most emphasise that reflection is not just thinking or going back over an event in the mind or in writing; its purpose is to work out what is already known and add new information with the result of drawing out knowledge, new meaning and a higher level of understanding (Paterson & Chapman, 2013). As an early proponent of reflective practice, Dewey (1933) talked about reflection as being “not simply a sequence of ideas, but a consequence—a consecutive ordering in such a way that each determines the next as its proper outcome, while each in turn leans back on its predecessors” (pp. 2-3). Dewey (1933) further emphasised that practitioners need to have three attitudes to active reflection: open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility. Together, these would allow a practitioner to adopt a conscious and systematic approach to thinking about their experiences with the aim of learning from them and changing behaviours (Paterson & Chapman, 2013).

It needs to be established at the outset, however, that critical reflection and reflection are not synonymous. Brookfield (2017) clarified that critical reflection is not simply a deeper and more intense form of reflection. On the contrary, “reflection becomes critical when it’s focused on teachers understanding power and hegemony” (p. 9). Critical reflection, therefore, has two distinct purposes: illuminating power, and uncovering hegemony. With regards to the first purpose, Brookfield (2017) stated that:

Critical reflection happens when teachers uncover how educational processes and interactions are framed by wider structures of power and dominant ideology. It involves teachers questioning the assumptions they hold about the way power dynamics operate in classrooms, programs, and schools and about the justifiable exercise of teaching power. (p. 9)

In saying this, I recognise that classrooms cannot be considered as being separate from the social and political realities that exist outside of it. In fact, the classroom can never entirely be under the control of the teacher, and external factors shape what is going on in a classroom. Students bring their own individual experiences in the classroom, which might often conflict with those of others or with those of the teacher. Critical reflection enables teachers to unearth these power dynamics and come up with finding ways of how conflicting points of views can coexist within the classroom space.

Elaborating on the latter purpose, Brookfield (2017) asserted that:

Critical reflection happens when teachers try to uncover assumptions and practices that seem to make their teaching lives easier but that actually ends up working against their own best long-term interests – in other words, assumptions and practices that are hegemonic. It involves examining how to push back against this exploitation by changing structures and alerting others to its presence. (p. 9)

Brookfield (2017) elaborates upon this by first explaining the term hegemony as a process whereby ideas and actions that benefit a small minority in power are accepted by the wider majority as being wholly natural. Over time, these acts and beliefs become so embedded in our thoughts and culture that they seem like the only right thing to do. Critically reflective teachers question these norms and challenge these hegemonic assumptions. The online learning environment offers an interesting challenge to one such hegemonic idea that Brookfield (2017) talks about: the time and effort that teachers have to spend in building relationships with an ever-increasing number of students in university classrooms. This thesis is an attempt to establish whether this idea is truly hegemonic, i.e., serves the interest of a few minority in

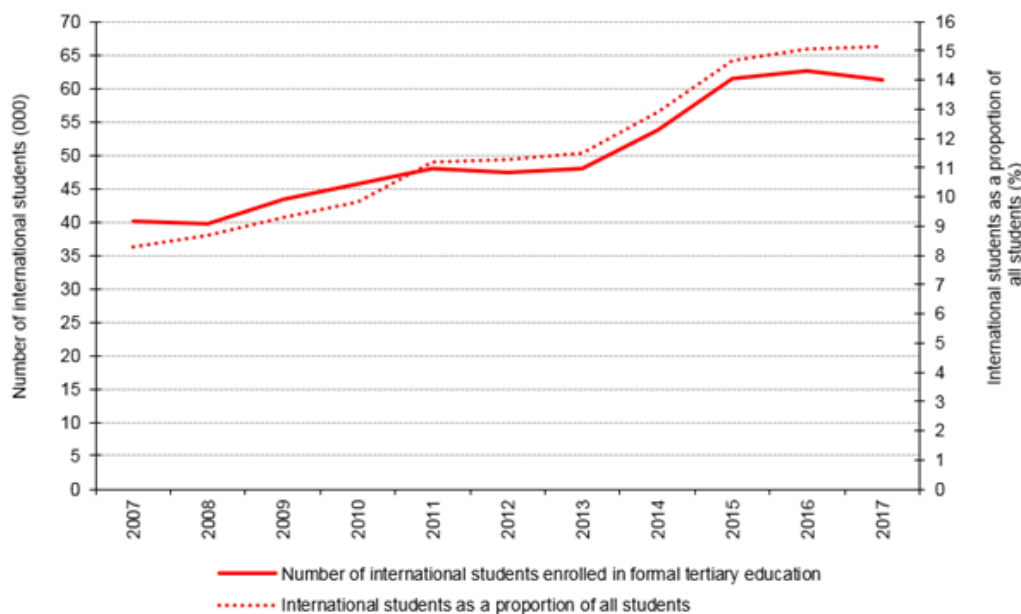


Figure 1: International student enrolment in tertiary education in New Zealand (Education counts (a), n.d.)

power, or whether developing these relationships is central to how teachers and students interact with each other in an online environment. In doing so, dialogue between the teachers and students has been used as a bridge between teachers and students, and has been considered as one possible way of developing the student-teacher relationships.

Thompson and Thompson (2008) analysed criticality from two dimension: depth and breadth. Depth refers to looking beneath the surface of a situation and see what assumptions are being made, and what thoughts, feelings and values are being drawn upon. Breadth, on the other hand, takes into consideration the broader sociological context, and includes factors such as power relations, discrimination and oppression. With my research focusing on the critically reflective practice of educators, it is important to consider both dimensions of critical reflection. This is particularly so due to the diversity in the student population pursuing a tertiary level degree in New Zealand. The most recent data issued by the Ministry of Education, New Zealand, reveals that there has been a steady increase in the number of international students (as a proportion of all students) enrolled in formal tertiary education, from approximately 9% in 2007 to approximately 14% in 2017 (Education Counts (a), n.d.). Figure 1(above) illustrates this trend graphically.

According to data from 2013, a total of 47,951 international students were enrolled with New Zealand tertiary education organisations. The top five source countries of these students were China, India, the United States of America, South Korea and Malaysia (Education Counts (b), n.d.). The domestic student population also comprises of four major ethnic groups, Māori, Pasifika, Europeans and Asians, in addition to minorities from various other ethnic groups (Education Counts (c), n.d.). If practitioners in New Zealand are truly critically reflective, they will need to take account of the cultural and socio-political factors that shape the perceptions of this diverse range of students (Thompson & Pascal, 2012).

The continuously changing landscape and dynamics of classrooms, whether physical or virtual, whether primary, secondary or tertiary, requires educators to go beyond developing techniques for managing instruction in class, keeping students engaged with tasks, and handling student behaviour. It requires the educator to be fluid and be able to move in many directions, depending on the situation being faced. Effective teaching, therefore, calls for educators to be critically reflective, which in turn requires them to be a self-aware and self-reflective critical inquirer (Larrivee, 2000). The socio-political context has an influence on how teachers reflect and reconstruct their pre-existing notions regarding the various issues surrounding them. Not only should teachers be political themselves, (Brookfield, 2017; Freire, 1998; Smyth, 1992), but the race, ethnicity and culture of students also has an impact on how the learning experience of the student is shaped (Howard, 2003). While developing an interactive model for programme planning for adults, Caffarella (2002) placed “discerning the context” as the first step, where the person responsible for planning should, among other things, be “knowledgeable about the people, the organisation and the wider environmental context” (pp. 23-24). Howard (2003) suggested that this can be achieved by encouraging teachers to be critically reflective and construct culturally relevant pedagogies in order to enhance the learning experience of the diverse students, and ensuring equitable provision for these students.

How dialogue can help in critical reflection

Understanding such disparity in social, cultural and political factors can be made easier if there is some sort of dialogue between the individuals involved. All conversation between individuals, however, cannot be classified as dialogue. Bakhtin was among the most influential philosophers to develop the concept of ‘dialogism’ (1981), in which the aim was not for two persons to agree, but to co-construct a new understanding of the world while remaining

different (Yagata, 2017). Gadamer (2013) recognised that the understanding of the world that individuals develop is prejudiced by their cultural, historical, and linguistic traditions and situatedness. He therefore asserted that individuals have different points of view, and dialogue allows individuals to reach new levels of understanding them by letting go of their cultural and historical prejudices. Gadamer (2013) further contested that genuine dialogue makes us question our presuppositions and when we do so, we open ourselves to the possibility of transforming or renewing our views. Doing so requires a conscious effort, since such a genuine dialogue is possible only when the participants are open-minded and reflective (Yagata, 2017).

Freire (1993) played an instrumental role in linking dialogue to critical reflection. He voiced his concern over the ‘banking’ approach of traditional pedagogies, positing instead a critical pedagogy and ‘problem-solving’ approach. He suggested that a critical pedagogical approach can unite critical thinking and dialogue to develop an approach to learning that takes into consideration the impact of one’s words and actions (Cunliffe, 2016). Freire insisted that education cannot be neutral in nature, but has to bring about a meaningful transformation in those who are associated in the process of education – be it the teacher or the student. Bringing about this transformation, however, requires a free flow of ideas, and some dialogue, between the teacher and the students. Although these are constrained in a virtual learning environment, the self-motivation of students is known to be a driving force behind the successful completion of online courses. In the words of Freire (1993):

Dialogue is thus an existential necessity. And since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person’s “depositing” ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be “consumed” by the discussants...it is an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another. (p. 88-89).

The online learning environment, however, does not offer the same promptness of dialogue that would be possible in the face-to-face, conventional teaching and learning environment. Zhang (2015) finds that online students often feel disconnected and isolated from teachers and class fellows, which can have a negative impact on students’ satisfaction and success. There has been commendable development of Web 2.0 tools that help to establish and maintain teaching and social presence in the online teaching and learning environment. These include both synchronous and asynchronous tools, which help make online learning “flexible, accessible, and credible” (Zhang, 2015). Nonetheless, such claims overlook the challenges

associated with maintaining dialogue between the teachers and students, and among the students themselves, as the semester progresses. With millions of people having access to online distance learning around the world, and considerable growth predicted for at least the next ten years (Harrison et al., 2017), finding out how teachers critically reflect on their pedagogy in an online learning environment is pertinent.

This link between dialogue and critical reflection also clarifies how this research will be carried out. While collecting data and interpreting it in relation to my research question, my focus as a researcher will not be the frequency or the actual content of the dialogue between the participants and their students. Rather, this research will focus on how practitioners critically reflected on this dialogue, the change this brought upon in their pedagogical choices, and how they grew professionally as a result of this.

Research question

Based on the above, the research question that will be investigated through this research is:

How do teachers working in virtual learning environments construct their notions of critical reflection, and what strategies do they develop to encourage a critically reflective dialogical pedagogical relationship with their students?

Research paradigm, design and participants

My research falls within the qualitative paradigm. The inductive logic has therefore been used, where data was first collected and theoretical ideas and concepts then emerged from it. The research methods used to collect data included interviews and reflective journaling. The research philosophy that shaped my views and values as I interpreted the data found support in post-intentional phenomenology (Vagle, 2016). Chapter Three discusses each of these in detail, while a brief description of my participants and the context in which this research was conducted is provided below.

In order to investigate my research question, I gathered first hand data from three participants; Dianne, Molly and Henry (pseudonyms). All of them were educators teaching in an online teaching and learning environment at the tertiary level. Although each of them had been

teaching in the conventional, face-to-face environment for about ten years, each had begun their pedagogic journey of teaching in an online environment in the semester that I interviewed them in. This proved to be invaluable for my research, since it helped trace the experiences of practitioners who have only recently started teaching in an online environment, and gain insights into how it challenged them to critically reflect on their pedagogical approach. Each participant was interviewed twice, once during the first week of the semester and then again after seven weeks had passed. Even if there was a delay in scheduling the second interview (owing to the busy schedule of the participants), we only discussed their pedagogic journey over the first seven weeks of the semester. The time period was set at seven weeks because two of the participants were teaching courses to Bachelor of Education students who attended Practicum seven weeks into the semester to gain first-hand teaching experience in primary schools in New Zealand. During this time, the students enrolled in this programme do not attend classes at university, thus there is a break in contact between the students and their teachers. Therefore, I restricted my data collection to the first seven weeks of the semester. The participants were also requested to maintain reflective journals on a fortnightly basis over the same time period. The participants were not employed at the same university, and were therefore using different learning management systems. Since my research does not explore how efficiently they were able to use these learning management systems, or what tools helped them to establish dialogue with their students, this did not influence the interpretation of my findings. Nonetheless, the low number of participants is recognised as a shortcoming of this study.

Definitions of key terms

Before proceeding with the study, some key terms that will be used repeatedly need to be defined.

Educator/teacher/practitioner

I will be using these three terms interchangeably in subsequent chapters. In order to justify this, I made use of the definition offered by the Oxford dictionary, which defines a teacher as “someone who teaches”. This makes it necessary to define the word ‘teach’, which, according to the same dictionary, is to “impart knowledge or to instruct (someone) as to how to do

something” (Oxford Living Dictionaries, b). Also, the dictionary defines the term educator as “a person who provides instruction or education”, but also as a “teacher” (Oxford Living Dictionaries, c).

I had to resort to definitions being offered by the dictionary as opposed to how this term is defined in the existing literature because not only is there no clear definition of the word teacher or educator in the existing literature, there is little agreement on the role that a teacher has to play in class. At one extreme is Ranciere (1991), who believed that to teach is to “transmit learning and form minds simultaneously, by leading those minds, according to an ordered progression, from the most simple to the most complex” (p. 29). He also emphasised the importance of the motivation to learn, which alone is sufficient for a person to learn even without knowing how to read or write. Freire, on the other hand, insisted that education is not neutral and has to bring about a meaningful transformation in those who are associated in the process of education – be it the teacher or the student. This transformation can be brought about by a free flow of ideas between the teacher and the students. This free flow of ideas, however, is not possible without dialogue. A third perspective worth mentioning here is Felman’s (1987) exploration of Lacan’s view of the teacher as being simultaneously in the position of a student:

The position of the teacher is itself the position of the one who learns, of the one who teaches nothing other than the way he learns. The subject of teaching is interminably – a student; the subject of teaching is interminable – a learning (p. 88).

Here, Lacan’s views seem similar to Freire’s idea of education bringing about a transformation in the lives of not only those who are learning, but also in the lives of those who are teaching.

Teaching and learning environment

I will deliberately be making use of the term ‘teaching and learning environment’, since I believe that these are like two sides of the same coin—any environment where there is some learning taking place is characterised by a source of knowledge as well. This does not necessarily have to be traditional models of ‘teachers’ passing their knowledge on to ‘students’, or recent models of students actively participating in discussions (Gound, 2016); even if there is some self-learning going on, that may be happening through observation, there is always some source of knowledge which is being interpreted. As Biesta (2018) argues:

the point of education is not that children and young people learn *something*, [but] that they learn it *for a reason*, and that they learn it *from someone*. Education thus always raises three questions—the question of *content*, the question of *purpose*, and the question of *relationship* (Biesta, 2018, pp. 31-32, emphasis in original).

With my research focusing on the question of *relationships*, Biesta's (2018) assertion that education should not focus exclusively on outcomes (in terms of achievements and grades), but should also have a concern for socialisation, becomes even more relevant. Although in the cited example, he discusses the design for classrooms in schools, and refers to education for children, his comments are nonetheless pertinent to my research. The two teaching and learning environments related to this study are discussed below:

Face-to-face/conventional teaching and learning environment

I will be using the above two interchangeably in my research, and together, these refer to the traditional way of schooling that has been used ever since the ancient Greeks started formalising education. In the context of higher education, face-to-face courses have a scheduled time and venue for each class during the semester. As a result, such a teaching and learning environment is sometimes called 'same time-same place'. Most communication between the teachers and students takes place during class, or just before or after the class, with some announcements being made via email. (Gound, 2016).

Online teaching and learning environment

Online teaching and learning is a subset of distance learning. Distance learning dates back to the 1700s, when correspondence occurred by letter writing. Technological advances saw distance learning progressing through the use of radio, television broadcasting, and more recently, through information technology and the Internet (Gound, 2016). As in all distance learning environments, the online teaching and learning environment is also characterised by the teacher and the student not being connected in time and space. Teaching and learning in the online environment becomes possible through the use of a learning management system (LMS), a platform where educators can upload course content to share with students. Technically speaking, a learning management system is a "server-based software program that interfaces with a database containing information about users, courses, and content...what

makes [it] unique is its instructional nature” (Piña, 2010). Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland (2005) categorised pedagogical tools associated with learning management systems into those for content creation, communication, assessment, and administration. The tools relevant for my research are asynchronous (non-real-time) communication tools, which allow teachers to incorporate student-teacher and student-student interaction into the course. Examples of these include course announcements, student web-pages, exchange of e-mails, threaded discussion boards, wikis, blogs, and file sharing (Piña, 2010).

There are varying degrees to which a course is mediated from a distance in the online learning environment. Courses that involve no face-to-face interaction between the student and teachers are termed ‘purely online’, or ‘fully online’ course. Courses that involve a combination of face-to-face meetings with online instruction are called ‘blended learning’ courses. These are discussed in detail the next chapter.

Dialogue

In Chapter Two, the debate over defining this term has been elaborated in detail. Here, it will suffice to say that for this research, I will be using the definition of dialogue offered by Nikulin (2010). He characterised dialogue between two individuals as requiring the existence of a personal other, voice, unfinalisability, and constant disagreement with the other. Since discourse analysis is not a part of this research, the dialogue between the students and teachers, or amongst the students, will not be analysed in detail. On the contrary, the engagement of the students with the online components of the course will be judged by how satisfied the teachers were with the frequency and depth of dialogue taking place on the discussion forum for their courses.

Technology/Digital Technology

I do acknowledge that ‘digital technology’ is a subset of ‘technology’; while technology includes the application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes (Oxford Living Dictionary, n.d.), digital technology deals with the creation and use of computerised devices in particular (Dictionary.com, n.d.). The wide availability of books may therefore be attributable to technology (through the use of the printing press). Similarly, the use of an overhead projector during a lecture can also be an example of the use of technology in education. For the purpose

of my research, however, the technology being referred to specifically is the use of Learning Management Systems, the use of which inevitably require the use of a network and the Internet. These facilitate the storage and sharing of knowledge, and also offer a platform where participants may communicate with each other. Current development in technology also focuses more so on the use of digital technology. I will therefore assume the term ‘technology’ and ‘digital technology’ as being congruent in my research.

Significance of the study

Most research talking about the critically reflective practice of educators is based on conditions faced by the education sector in the United States of America. For instance, Hernandez and Endo (2017) discuss the changing demographics of the population in the United States of America, with the population of the African Americans expected to grow at 46% between 2010 and 2050, Latinos at 87% and Asian Americans at 213%. With more than three-fourths of the teachers being White Americans, there is need for these teachers to develop and adopt a critically reflective pedagogical approach. Similarly, Larrivee (2000) talks about other social dimensions in the United States of America, such as students who are coming to school as being “neglected, abused, hungry, and ill-prepared to learn and work productively” (p. 293). Although these changing demographics and social conditions apply to New Zealand as well, as mentioned in a previous paragraph, there has been less research that centres on these issues here. This is not to suggest that no work has been done. For instance, significant contributions were made by Campbell (1997), Donaghy and McGee (2003), and Forbes (2012), focusing particularly on asynchronous online discussions in a blended learning environment. These studies provided elaborate details on the perspectives of not only teachers, but also the students who are making use of an online learning environment to facilitate their interactions. None of these studies, however, focus on how online educators critically reflect on the dialogue that they have with their students in an online learning environment. By narrowing the focus of this study on critical reflection and dialogic pedagogy, I hope to make an important contribution to the existing literature through this research, especially since it highlights the significance of taking into consideration the perspective of the educators as universities make their way towards offering students a distance learning option.

Thesis organisation

Chapter One has detailed my interest in this study, and has developed an argument for the connection between dialogue and critical reflection. It has then extended this argument to the online teaching and learning environment, and rationalises this research based on the lack of existing literature around this topic. Chapter Two presents a detailed and critical review of the existing literature around the key ideas being investigated in this research. It begins by discussing what dialogue is, its role in the context of higher education and the critically reflective practice by teachers. It then critically analyses the role of technology in higher education, the politics behind it, and how dialogue is used in higher education in an online context. Chapter Three describes and justifies the research methodology and research methods that I elected to use in this study. Chapter Four presents the main findings from this study. These are first presented for each participant individually, highlighting the uniqueness of the experiences of each participant. The common findings across all participant are then grouped together under themes that emerge from my findings. Chapter Five analyses my findings in light of existing literature, and assesses where my findings support, oppose or add value to the existing literature. The discussion again follows a thematic pattern. Chapter Six draws out the main conclusions from this study by reconciling the summary of my findings and their analysis from the previous two chapters. It ends by discussing the limitations to this study, and finally identifies avenues for further research that can potentially be explored.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This research aims to find out how teachers working in virtual learning environments construct their notions of critical reflection. The underlying theoretical assumptions, borrowed from Freire's concept of dialogic pedagogy, have been extended to the online teaching and learning environment. The central question of this study is to determine what strategies online practitioners develop to encourage a critically reflective dialogical pedagogical relationship with their students. In this literature review, significant literature that illuminates this question has been critically analysed. Key ideas related to my work include conceptualisation of the terms 'dialogue' and 'critical reflection', and how they are inter-related in the published research. Ideas relevant to distance education and its shift towards online education are also explored, particularly in the context of higher education and the political environment surrounding these concepts. The chapter concludes by exploring how dialogue is used in distance learning programmes offered at the tertiary level.

Defining dialogue

Dialogue in different forms (political, philosophical, and dramatic) can be traced back to Ancient Greece, where it emerged in the context of the polis as a community of actively participating citizens. The first written dialogical accounts were also found in Ancient Greece in Plato's work. Discussions on human dialogue re-emerged in the work of Yakubinsky (1923) and Bakhtin (1981) (as cited in Dafermos, 2018). Writing in 1923, Yakubinsky characterised monologue as being artificial, since it showed the relationship of power and authority of the speaker, and did not allow for a response by the listener. For him, dialogue was natural, since it is characterised by constant interruptions. While one person is speaking, the other must not only listen, but also prepare his or her response. This response is dependent upon two things: the existing mind-set of the listener, and prior experiences of the listener (Skidmore, 2016a). Moving beyond purely linguistic or literary phenomenon, Bakhtin defined dialogue in relation to consciousness. For him, the existence of a person who has the ability to think and reason made it necessary for the person to communicate with others. He therefore claimed that "to be

means to communicate” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 287, as cited in Dafermos, 2018). Consequently, the dialogic interaction between people allowed for truth to be born collectively between them.

Before exploring the place of dialogue in pedagogy, it is important to define the term ‘dialogue’. There are numerous definitions of dialogue, each depending upon the context in which it is used. Rule (2004) considered dialogue “as a process that involves conflict, tension and growth; an unfolding of selves within particular contexts” (p. 326). Considering the etymology of dialogue, he concluded that:

[dialogue] signifies a particular kind of speech that happens between two or more people, and is associated with the pursuit of knowledge (reason, argument, discourse). It also has a connotation of *difference* (*dia* as ‘apart’): the two or more who partake in dialogue are separate and distinct as individual beings, as speakers and as thinkers, but the conversation brings them together and fashions a unity of process through their joint engagement (p. 320. Emphasis in original)

Dafermos (2018) also offered several definitions of the term dialogue. In the first, he defined dialogue as a “live conversation between two or more people”. In order to avoid generalising every type of conversation as dialogue, Nikulin (2010) identified four components that distinguished a dialogue from a conversation: the existence of personal other, voice, unfinalisability, and constant disagreement with the other. In the second meaning, Dafermos (2018) referred to dialogue as a “genre or literary device”, which has historically been used by many thinkers, such as Plato, to give shape to their ideas in various ways. A third definition considered “the universal condition of using language at all” as being dialogue; this perspective overarches both written and oral speech, and considers language itself to have a dialogical character. The fourth defined dialogue as “an essential characteristic of consciousness”, which is similar to how Bakhtin (1981) defined it. Since the appropriateness of the definition is dependent on the context in which it is used, it is imperative to examine the importance of dialogue in learning environments.

Baumfield, Hall and Wall (2013) considered talk as being central to all teaching concepts; this makes the use of dialogue a logical step towards any aspect of teaching and learning as part of an enquiry. The origins of dialogic pedagogy can be traced back to Paulo Freire’s seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993). Freire’s ideas regarding the role of dialogue in pedagogical approaches were similar to Bakhtin’s belief that “truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (Bakhtin, 1984, p.110, as cited in

Dafermos, 2018). Questioning the conventional outlook of education, Freire drew a distinction between the concepts of ‘banking education’ and ‘problem-posing education’. Traditionally, knowledge was considered a “gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (Freire, 1993, p. 72), which he called ‘banking education’. In contrast to this he conceptualised ‘problem-posing education’, which regarded “dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality” (Freire, 1993, p. 72). Entering into dialogue with their students itself implies that the teacher acknowledges them as “fellow beings capable of consciousness and intentionality, and treats them as co-investigators into the nature of reality” (Skidmore & Murakami, 2016). The seventh letter in Freire’s book *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach* (2005) also elaborates on the need for educators to transition from “talking to students” to “talking with them”. If dialogue extends to encompass topics beyond the course content, it may help in not only creating a more ambient environment in their classroom, but may also encourage students to start thinking critically about the various socio-cultural-political issues around them. Once students realise that their teachers are not only talking to them, but also listening to them, they learn to start being open to the opinion of others as well (Freire, 2005).

Freire elaborated upon the concept of dialogue in his later books as well, such as *Pedagogy for Liberation*, which he co-authored with Ira Shor. There he defined dialogue as “a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it. ...Dialogue seals the relationship between the cognitive subjects, the subjects who know, and who try to know.” (Freire & Shor, 1987, pp. 98-99). Rather than viewing dialogue as a technique for instruction, Freire and Shor (1987) considered it as a process where both student *and* teacher, give new meaning to the knowledge they bring into the class. This provides opportunity to teachers to re-learn the material with the students in the course of teaching them, but from a new perspective. Nonetheless, entering into dialogue with students does not imply equality in the relationship between the teacher and the students. The authors emphasised the leadership responsibilities of teachers due to their richer experiences and wider range of knowledge. Teachers also need to be authoritative to ensure that students respect their teacher and other fellow students in their class.

Freire (1993) also insisted on not mistaking dialogue as a mere technique of instruction. Rather, it represented the social character of both learning and knowing. Dialogue, just for the sake of conversations, is not sufficient. The quality of dialogue also deserves attention. Wilhelmson (2006) found that the quality of interaction depended on the dialogic competence of the

participants. According to him, dialogic quality depended on four aspects: how close the topic is to individual perspective, the ability to listen carefully to the experiences of others, the ability to question one's pre-conceived notions, i.e. critical self-reflection, and critical reflection on statements made by others by asking them to elaborate and explain their experiences. Before relating dialogue to critical reflection, which is the underlying theme of this research (particularly in the context of online education), it is important to situate the role of dialogue in higher education.

Dialogue in the context of higher education

Research supports the use of dialogue for teaching at all levels of education (Mercer, Hennessy, & Warwick, 2017). This involves not only dialogue between the teacher and the students, but even amongst the students themselves. For instance, Frijters, ten Dam, and Rijlaarsdam (2008) designed two ways of encouraging critical thinking among their graduate students, one dialogic and the other non-dialogic. They found that the dialogic approach resulted in a more positive effect on the critical thinking competencies of the students. Storey and Wang (2017) also asserted that in order to gain any valuable learning outcomes, it is imperative for students at the graduate level to engage in meaningful dialogue. They applied the 'Critical Friends' (CF) framework to a graduate class in the face-to-face learning context. In their study, critical friends were defined as two or more individuals who provided both support and challenge by asking challenging questions, thereby forcing each other to reassess their thoughts and opinions by offering alternate viewpoints of their own. The authors found that by allocating some time at the beginning of each session of their graduate class to discussions with their critical friend, their students started engaging in structured dialogue, which involved the discussion of their own understanding of concepts based on well-connected ideas. They concluded that as a teaching strategy, critical friends can enhance student-cognitive engagement toward meaningful learning outcomes, and ensure not only equity of student dialogue, but also a commitment to learning through dialogue. Similar results were found when the concept of critical friends was used by Kiewkor, Wongwanich, and Piromsombat (2014).

It is also worthwhile to document here the diversity in human speech; speakers modify their speech depending upon the conditions of communication, the forms of communication, and the goals of communication (Yakubinsky, 1923). Skidmore (2016b) related this diversity to the varying modes of discourse found in education. The amount of exchange that takes place in

this dialogue can, and does, vary, depending on whether the educator himself is authoritative or democratic. At one extreme is lecturing, where there may be some superficial exchange of dialogue, but the sequence of topics, pace of interaction and selection of speakers is determined by the teacher. Based on this, he classified lecturing as ‘monologic dialogue’. As one moves from lectures, to recitation, to teacher-led discussion, to small group discussions, there is a shift from monologue, to monologic dialogue, to dialogic monologue, and finally to dialogue. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 can be critically analysed in light of existing literature. Giving in to the pressures of neoliberalism, the norm in most universities is to offer classes in large lecture halls, so that a large number of students can be catered to at one time (Benade, 2015a). Relating this to Figure 2, the teaching style adopted by the practitioner in such a situation is more likely to resemble either a lecture or recitation. It is likely that the banking model of education is adopted in such an environment, because genuine dialogue can occur only in smaller classes (Shor & Freire, 1987, as cited in Benade, 2015a). In a best-case scenario, there might be discussions and collaborative inquiry going on in a large lecture hall, but these are different from dialogue. There are exceptions to this norm in higher education, one of them being the supervisor-research candidate relationship. This relationship is characterised by conversation, discussion, and dialogue between the supervisor and the research candidate (Benade, 2015a). Benade (2015a) also considers the differences between these three, where discussion has a more clear purpose and direction than a conversation, and dialogue “provides an opportunity to tease out and unfold ideas progressively” (p. 106). This dialogical pedagogical approach may not always be a comfortable process for the supervisor and the research candidate, but nonetheless, it

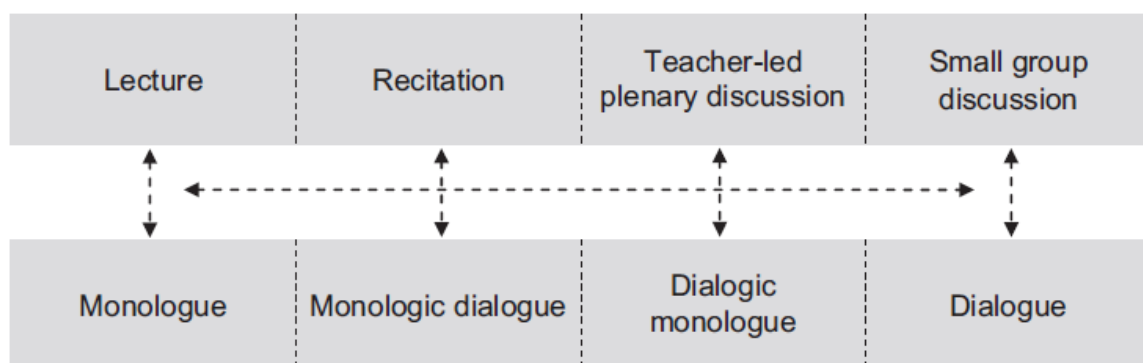


Figure 2: Degrees of dialogism in classroom discourse. Adopted from Skidmore (2016b, p. 18).

should be seen as a source of mutual growth (Benade, 2015a). In the context of Figure 2, the dialogical relationship between a supervisor and research candidate resembles a small group discussion.

Differences in learning outcomes that arise when students are taught following a lecturing style (monologue) compared to those who are taught using small-group discussion (dialogue) have also been reported in the published literature. For instance, Skidmore (2016a) comprehensively discussed ideas that draw on the dialogic nature of language. In particular, he elaborated on concepts developed by prominent researchers, such as dialogic instruction (Nystrand, 1997), dialogic enquiry (Wells, 1999), dialogical pedagogy (Skidmore, 2010), and dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2004). Each of these ideas is based on empirical observation studies, and emphasised on the potential of teacher-student interaction which enabled an active participation by students in shaping the agenda of classroom discourse. Of particular interest here is the large-scale study by Nystrand (1997), which involved discourse analysis of 400 English lessons in 25 high schools in the United States of America. His study concluded that students who are taught by dialogically organised instruction tend to do better than those taught using a monologic, recitational approach. Nystrand's (1997) study is also significant since it revealed that it is not only the amount of interaction between the teachers and the students that is important, but also the relevance of this interaction to the topic being discussed. A key finding, therefore, was that the choices made by the teacher had an influence on the conditions for learning that developed in the classroom (as cited in Skidmore, 2016a). Critically reflecting on these choices may help the teacher make more informed choices in the future.

What is critical reflection?

Although the roots of how reflection is known today can be traced back to Plato's *Meno* and Kant's *Critique of Practical Judgement*, Dewey and Schön popularised the concept of reflection as we currently know it (Mann, 2016). In his book *How We Think*, Dewey (1933) defined reflective thinking as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 6). Its focus on practical problem solving, and the relationship between experience, interaction and reflection, led to the development of concepts such as practitioner inquiry, action research, and reflective practice (Mann, 2016). Dewey distinguished between reflective thinking and unsystematic thinking, whereby the latter is

characterised by lack of evidence, and is based on false beliefs or assumptions, or mindlessly following tradition and authority. As opposed to this, reflective thinking is characterised by sequence and consequence—it is logically sequenced and includes a consideration of the consequences of a decision (Valli, 1997). This concept of reflective thinking was further developed by Schön (1983) and Kolb (1984)

Schön (1983) built on the concept of critical reflection into what he called ‘reflective practice’. Criticising the traditional Western separation of theory and practice, he differentiated between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. He argued that teachers respond to unpredictable situations that arise in their everyday practice. ‘Reflection-in-action’ allows room for uncertainty, intuition and value judgements that teachers have to make while they are teaching. ‘Reflection-on-action’ is retrospective in nature, where teachers think back to critical teaching incidents, think over what actions they took, and how they could amend or change their response when encountered with similar situations in the future (Valli, 1997).

In his model of *praxis*-oriented approach to learning, Kolb (1984) developed a cycle of experiential learning based on reflection. In the first stage, an individual goes through a ‘concrete experience’. This is followed by ‘reflective observation’, during which the individual analyses, reviews and reflects upon the experience. The third stage is that of ‘abstract conceptualisation’, which involves learning from the experience. Finally, the individual engages in ‘active experimentation’, during which he or she actively tries out what has been learnt during the experience. This is a cyclical process, where the experimentation may lead to further reflection and a revision of the abstracts that have been conceptualised (Kolb, 1984). In line with Freire’s, Dewey’s and Schön’s ideas discussed above, this learning theory also centres on critical reflection; learning depends on how an individual critically reflects upon the experiences and draws meaning out of them (Turesky & Gallagher, 2011).

The terms ‘reflection’ and ‘critical reflection’ are often confused and wrongly assumed to be interchangeable (Mann, 2016). This makes it necessary to distinguish between them at the outset. A very basic way of defining reflection is to think about something introspectively. This thinking may happen ‘in the head’, through writing (e.g. journaling), or even while talking to someone else. The outcome of this is usually a change in practical action. Critical reflection, on the other hand, enables practitioners to move beyond merely analysing whether their techniques are working or not, to a critical examination of values and ideologies. As a result, critical reflection is more likely to “challenge assumptions, interrogate the ideological status

quo, question institutional norms and confront inequality, discrimination, gender bias, and marginalisation” (Mann, 2016, p. 10).

Further, these terms often have different meanings when discussed in different disciplines. It is therefore important to emphasise the difference between reflection and critical reflection in the context of education. By itself, reflection is not necessarily critical (Brookfield, 2015). In teacher preparation programmes, tools such as writing a philosophy of teaching statement or reflection-based papers, helps teachers to continuously *reflect* to make appropriate changes to their instructional strategies and gain self-awareness about how to continuously improve their practice (Hernandez & Endo, 2017). *Critical reflection*, on the other hand, involves “personal discourse of reasons for decisions about events, taking into consideration the broader contexts of historical, social, and political considerations” which enables teachers to make meaningful, positive, and substantial differences in the lives of the families and students they serve (Harris, Bruster, Peterson, & Shutt, 2010, p. 33). It involves both the capacity for critical inquiry and self-reflection. Critical inquiry involves the conscious consideration of the moral and ethical implications and consequences of classroom practices on students. Self-reflection goes beyond critical inquiry by adding an aspect of deep examination of personal values and beliefs (Larrivee, 2000). According to Cranton (1996), critical reflection is the process by which individuals develop an alternative way of acting by identifying the assumptions governing their actions, locating the historical and cultural origins of these assumptions, and questioning the meaning of the assumptions. According to Sullivan, Glenn, Roche, and McDonagh (2016), the current literature suggests that critical reflection is the “capacity to challenge the assumptions through which one gives meaning to one’s own experience following a purpose of emancipation”. They themselves took on a broader definition of critical reflection, and asserted that it is not possible to separate the micro level, i.e., what is going on in the classroom, from the macro level of education in general, i.e. the complex socio-cultural and policy contexts. It is also not possible to separate our work from our values. Therefore, critical reflection involves intentionally looking at issues from as many angles as possible, analysing them for their effects on us and on others, and finally taking informed decisions about them.

Harris et al. (2010) talked about a process of three stages involved in critical reflection: dispositional, contextual, and experiential. Dispositional reflection is characterised as being composed of personal values, preferences and characteristics of the person engaged in reflection. Contextual reflection is composed of cultural forces, such as race, gender, ethnicity, institutional policies, and personal knowledge and skills that have the potential to shape the

event. Experiential reflection focuses on thoughts and feelings that occur from revisiting the event either in thought, verbally, or in writing. For Brookfield (2017), as a teacher, critical reflection is the “sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of our teaching assumptions” (p 3). Along similar lines, Trees (2013) asserted that a reflective teacher engages in “thoughtful observation and analysis of their action before, during and after” teaching. This self-reflection requires an examination and questioning of personal values and beliefs and also about how, what and why they are teaching.

At the heart of critical thinking is social change – it encourages individuals to challenge the status quo. This can only be done if the educators and the learners have certain ideologies that they follow. The traditional position of schooling views schools as merely instructional sites, and not as cultural and political sites where differentially empowered cultural and economic groups come together. Critics on the Left blame public schools in the Western world for reproducing capitalist relations of production and further deepening the ideologies of the ruling groups (Giroux, 1988). Giroux (1988) extended Dewey’s view on democracy to include not only a pedagogical struggle, but also a political and social struggle. This implies that critical pedagogy is just one of the important interventions to restructure ideological and material conditions of the wider society in the interest of creating a truly democratic society.

Freire’s (1993) rejection of the ‘banking concept of education’ in favour of ‘problem posing education’ also assumed reflection and action by both teachers and students. By recognising ‘*the word*’ as the true essence of dialogue, Freire went further to say:

But the word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible; accordingly, we must seek its constitutive elements. Within the word, we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world. (p. 87)

Although Freire used the term reflection, the intensity of his ideas suggested critical reflection, as evident in his comments about dialoguers uniting in their action to humanise and transform the world:

Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education. (p. 93)

For Freire, this transformation would not be possible if one was simply “depositing” ideas in another.

Critically reflective practice by the teacher

Developing critically reflective teachers who embrace their social responsibility to become equity-minded practitioners is one of the most challenging, timely and urgent issues for teacher educators to address (Hernandez & Endo, 2017). Having discussed how critical reflection is defined in the existing literature, the next step is to establish why it is important for teachers to critically reflect upon their work. One benefit that follows from the various definitions of critical reflection is that it helps an individual take informed decisions, which in turn helps achieve the consequences intended for these actions (Brookfield, 2017). Critically reflective teachers can also support the motivation behind their practice to their colleagues and students with greater conviction. Critically reflecting on their teaching practice helps keep teachers engaged, helping them avoid an emotional flatness which may occur if they keep applying tried and tested ways of teaching and assessing (Kreber, 2013).

Arguing in favour of student-centred teaching, Brookfield (2015) asserted that in order to critically reflect, teachers need to have a deep-rooted understanding regarding how their students experience learning. This would facilitate them in order to make good decisions related to how to organise learning, construct assignments and sequence instruction. One impediment to this is the distribution of power in a teacher-student relationship. Since the teacher has the power to award grades, students are seldom honest about their actual learning experience, unless they are assured of the anonymity of their feedback. In addition to student centred teaching, Brookfield (2017) identified three more elements that help teachers become critically reflective of their teaching practices. The first of these was critical friends, who not only listen to a problem being described, but also question it and suggest different ways of thinking through it. The second was personal experience, which influences the teaching methodology, and the third was reading educational theory and research literature, which may help teachers articulate what they feel into words, or even offer them new interpretations about various concepts. Using data from 2003, Harris et al. (2010) also concluded that teaching in isolation in their classrooms, without the support from experienced educators, is one of the leading causes of teachers leaving their profession early on in their career in the United States of America. Despite the emphasis placed on the practice of critical reflection by educators, the fact remains that the process of becoming a critical practitioner cannot be laid out in a linear

way. The journey involves a personal awareness discovery process, involving solitary reflection and challenging the status quo (Larrivee, 2000).

Evidence based practice is the standard of excellence in many fields (MacKenzie, 2015). One such way of documenting evidence of critical reflection is to maintain reflective journals. The next chapter will reveal the use of such journals as documenting evidence of critical reflection by the participants of this study. The use of this method of data collection was premised on the fact that maintaining such journals is a common practice adopted by numerous regulatory bodies across the globe. For example, the New Zealand Teaching Council, which is an independent statutory body providing the regulatory framework and disciplinary regime for teachers in New Zealand, requires teachers to provide documented evidence of their reflections as part of maintaining their status as registered teachers (Teaching Council, New Zealand, n.d.). In the United Kingdom, under the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and ‘Social Work Capability Framework’, there is enforcement of reflection through regulatory control (The British Association of Social Workers, n.d.). Although it has been argued that capturing reflection in language is a complicated task, and added to this is the fact that not every individual has the same command over the use of language to express themselves, the most commonly used way of measuring reflection remains language (Iyer, 2016). The author even provided a rationale for this documentation, based on the premise that reflection involves private and hidden thinking, which would be impossible to know unless it has been communicated through language.

Theories of learning

The previous two sections emphasised how critical reflection requires practitioners to develop an understanding of the circumstances that their students face. This makes it important for practitioners to have some understanding about how individuals learn as well, since without understanding these, critical reflection by the teacher would be incomplete. This section is arranged so that various learning theories will be discussed in context of computer-based learning and the online learning environment, and also related to Freire’s concept of banking education and problem-posing education. Learning theories can broadly be classified into five categories: behavioural theories, cognitive theories, experiential theories, social and sociocultural learning theories, and connectivism.

Behavioural theories revolve around explanations of learning that emphasise observable changes in behaviour. Much of early research in this school of thought, conducted by Pavlov (1927) and Skinner (1974), was based on the learning experiences of animals. Researchers focusing on this area argued that learning takes place as a result of reinforcement from an individual's experience, and were interested in behaviour that could be observed, measured and controlled (Ally, 2004). Evidence of principles of behaviourist learning in computer-based learning can be found in drill and skill software, educational games (Hartsell, 2006), and online tutorials (Gedera, 2014). These programs only allow learners to practice and upgrade themselves at skills they already know, and do not teach them new concepts. Learners in such an environment are passive recipients, and may not be able to apply what they have learnt when they encounter a new situation (Mayer, 2003). Freire's concept of 'banking education' has parallels here, since such technology aided education lets users practice what they already know, without necessarily understanding what they are learning.

Criticising the behaviourist approach for ignoring the mental activity of individuals, cognitive learning theories maintain that learning involves much more than a stimulus-response association. These theories focused on the internal processes of the mind, and how individuals' process information by thinking, using the resources of their memory, and by using insight. Learning occurs when individuals acquire new information from the environment, connect it to what they already know, and make an adjustment to their existing knowledge accordingly. In doing so, individuals continuously reshape their schemas, or maps, around which their knowledge is based (Hartsell, 2006).

Cognitive perspectives of learning can be found in technology based learning in applications such as mind mapping, simulation, and problem solving software programs (Hartsell, 2006). Learners are engaged in activities that develop their metacognitive skills, such as learning complex strategies and techniques (Motschnig-Pitrik & Holzinger, 2002). Although cognitivists consider learning as an "internal process that involves memory, thinking, reflection, abstraction, motivation and metacognition" (Ally, 2004), there is no space for dialogue in technology that supports this kind of learning. Therefore, although Freire's concept of problem posing education finds some space here, whereby learners try and resolve unknown problems, there is no evidence of dialogue that would support the mutual learning of the teacher and the student.

Moving away from ‘dependent learning’ approaches of behavioural and cognitive theories of learning, experiential and socio-cultural learning theories show a shift towards self-directed learning (Biesta, 2006). Although the roots of the use of experience in learning can be traced back to the work of John Dewey, the most well-known theory of experiential learning was developed by Kolb (1984). His experiential model is based on a learning cycle, which has four stages: concrete experience, in which individuals involve themselves in new experiences openly and without bias; reflective observation, in which individuals reflect on the new experience and observe it objectively from many angles; abstract conceptualisation, where learners formulate and generalise the observation into a logical concept; and active experimentation, in which individuals test the concept in a new situation. Although this model met with much criticism (Bergsteiner, Avery & Neumann, 2010; Coffield, Moseley, Hall & Ecclestone, 2004), it did lay the foundation for the development of other models of learning styles. This learning style has direct parallels with Freire’s rejection of banking education in favour of problem posing education. For Freire (1993),

the banking concept of education, which serves the interests of oppression, is also necrophilic. Based on mechanistic, naturalistic, spatialised view of consciousness, it transforms students into receiving objects. It attempts to control their thinking and action, leads women and men to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power. (p. 77)

On the other hand, problem posing education allows students to be critical co-investigators through dialogue with the teacher. Experiential learning, therefore, will only be valuable if students are allowed the flexibility to discuss their experiences freely, without presupposed biases held by the discussants.

Sociocultural thinking first appeared in the writings of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky, who was interested in finding out how higher order mental processes developed. Contributing to this theory of learning, Vygotsky contested that each human being’s capacities for acting, thinking, feeling and communicating, although based in his or her biological inheritance, are crucially dependent on the practices and artefacts which develop over time within particular cultures (Wells, 1999). Sociocultural philosophy centres around how individual, social and contextual issues have an impact on human activity, especially on learning and behaviour. This strand of philosophy acknowledges that human thought and behaviour is affected by the complex social world around them. Therefore, any attempt to understand human behaviour without taking into consideration the context in which the event is situated would at best be

partial (McInerney, Walker, & Liem, 2014). Biesta (2006) attributed “the emergence of constructivist and sociocultural theories” to four factors: economic (“the erosion of the welfare state”), demographic (“individualistic and individualised learning”), broadly philosophical (a questioning of the modernist project of education), and disciplinary (“new theories of learning”) (as cited in Freisen, 2013). He views these theories of learning principally as an activity on the part of the student, reducing the role of the teacher to one of support and facilitation:

Such theories have challenged the idea that learning is the passive intake of information and have instead argued that knowledge and understanding are actively constructed by the learner, often in cooperation with other learners. This has shifted the attention away from the activities of the teachers to the activities of the students. As a result, learning has become much more central in the understanding of the process of education. (Biesta, 2006, p. 17, as cited in Freisen, 2013, p. 22)

Tools used in e-learning, such as emails, blogs, discussion forums, bulletin boards, and video conferencing, support social constructivism by facilitating active and collaborative learning (Gedera, 2014). These tools can be related to Freire, as they allow for some sort of dialogue, albeit delayed, to take place between the participants. Finding its parallel in problem-posing education, this dialogue enables learners to examine ideas in a social context, reconsidering their earlier considerations as all learners express their own, and find collective ways to understand issues (Freire, 1993).

Today’s digital world, in which e-learning (electronic learning) and m-learning (mobile learning) offer new tools to mediate knowledge, demands a theory of learning compatible with the rapid changes being seen in knowledge creation and knowledge acquisition. More recently, there has been a shift towards concepts such as Pervasive Learning (P-learning) (Mounia, Rachida, & Lerma, 2012) and connectivism (Downes, 2010; Siemens, 2005). Connectivists criticise previous learning theories for conceptualising that learning occurs inside a person (through the cognitive process), and not addressing forms of learning that occur outside of people. For instance, acquiring knowledge can also be enhanced when learners connect to and participate in a learning community. These learning communities may involve face-to-face interaction with all participants being physically present at the same time in the same space, or it may be facilitated by technology whereby participants may be separated in time and space. Also, previous learning theories look at individual learners, failing to describe how learning takes place within organisations. Other sources of knowledge may be libraries, websites,

journals, and databases. Connectivism, therefore, tries to bridge this gap by acknowledging that knowledge can be acquired once individuals accept diversity of opinion. Learning connects specialised nodes, and may reside in non-human appliances. For connectivists, learning to know more is more important than what is already known, and this continual learning can happen when connections are maintained and nurtured. As a result, decision making is a learning process, which requires the ability to see connections between fields, ideas and concepts (Siemens, 2005). Similar to connectivism, P-learning is defined as a “social process that connects learners to communities of devices, people, and situations in a transparent and independent manner” (Mounia et al., 2012). The use of tools such as blogs and wikis in online learning, which allow individuals to work collaboratively with others by engaging in dialogue, bring online education a step closer to ‘problem-posing education’.

Technology in higher education

Digital technology and the Internet have brought about a revolution in numerous sectors, ranging from music to journalism to telecommunications. Education has been no exception, where the digital revolution simultaneously offers opportunities and challenges to higher education (Weller & Anderson, 2013). This impact can be seen at both the individual level, through the use of word processing, email, and search engines, and the institutional level, through the provision of Learning Management Systems (LMS), plagiarism detection tools, and synchronous and asynchronous online courses (Henderson, Selwyn, Finger, & Aston, 2015). West, Jones, and Semon (2012) claimed that the fastest growing phenomenon in the use of technology in education is online learning.

Despite the rapid proliferation of technology in education, there is little agreement over not only the term that should be used for an online learning environment, but also over what one actually is and where its boundaries with respect to other systems lie. When considered as the opposite of ‘real’, the term ‘virtual’ seems to suggest that the learning taking place through this kind of an environment would be inferior or poor in relation to the learning taking place in a face-to-face setting, which makes this term unpopular among some academics (Weller, 2007). Learning in a virtual environment takes place through learning management systems, which provide a place for learning and teaching activities to occur within a seamless environment that is not dependent upon time and space boundaries. These systems allow universities to manage a large number of courses using a common interface and set of resources. As already mentioned

in Chapter One, these systems also allow users to create content. Additionally, these systems can be used to upload a variety of files, such as documents, presentations, and audio/video files, just to name a few. These systems also allow users to add hyperlinks to websites or other sources housing information that lie outside the LMS. Assignments can also be submitted through these systems, allowing students to upload completed tasks assigned to them. Various terms are used to describe learning management systems in the existing literature; in general, literature originating from the United States tends to use the term ‘learning management systems’ and ‘course management systems’ interchangeably, while the term ‘virtual learning environment’ is more popular in Asia and Europe (Piña, 2010).

The beginning of distance education can be traced back to the mid-1800s, when correspondence courses were offered in Great Britain. More specifically, the University of London started offering the option of external degrees through correspondence study programmes, targeting women and racial minorities who could not enter higher education due to political or personal circumstances. At around the same time, in the United States, Anna Eliot Tickner launched a correspondence programme for women through the *Society to Encourage Studies at Home* (Lee, 2017). The mail system was the primary form of communication in the early days, where a teacher mailed a lesson to the student, who completed the work and then mailed it back to the teacher. Reduction in transit time brought about improvements in distance education (Goralski & Falk, 2017). Although the first asynchronous, web-based community groups were formed in the late 1960s, the first synchronous online education programme can be traced back to 1982, when the Western Behavioral Sciences Institute (WBSI) in LaJolla, California, initiated an executive education programme called the School of Management and Strategic Studies (SMSS). Hosted almost entirely on a computer conferencing system, its purpose was to engage professionals in critical dialogue on issues such as globalisation, technological innovation, and organisational strategy (Hamilton, 2016).

Tracing the history of distance learning, Nipper (1989) used a generational framework to suggest three generations of distance education: correspondence, broadcast and computer mediated. Accepting the first two generations as they are, Taylor (2001) labelled the third generation as tele-learning, adding a fourth generation of flexible learning based on online teaching, and a fifth generation of intelligent flexible learning (Anderson & Simpson, 2012; Goralski & Falk, 2017). Significant progress has been made since Taylor’s fifth generation of intelligent flexible learning in 2001. The turn to Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC’s), the use of data mining to individualise learning, and the use of mobile technology enabling learning

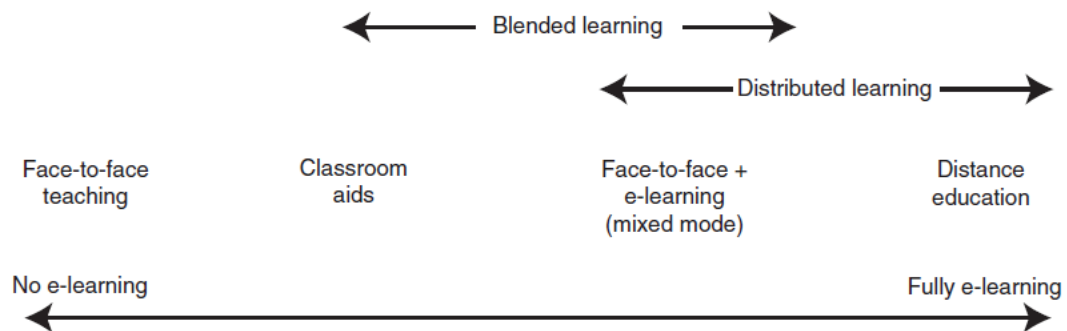


Figure 3: The continuum of technology based learning. Adopted from Bates, 2005, p. 9

in spaces inconceivable as learning venues, just to name a few, have transformed the learning experience in today's world (Anderson & Simpson, 2012). As modes of instruction in distance learning have evolved, many new terms have been used to label this kind of a teaching. There have been debates over the use of 'online education', 'online learning', 'e-learning', 'networked learning', 'distributed learning', and similar terms such as these. The use of each term has its unique history, and one term may not be replaceable by another (Hamilton, 2016). One such example is illustrated in Figure 3, which has been adopted from Bates (2005).

Allen and Seaman (2016) defined 'online course' as one in which at least 80% of the course content is delivered online. Courses in which 0 – 29% of the course content is delivered online will be classified as being face-to-face, falling under the category of traditional or web-facilitated courses. Courses having 30-79% of course content being delivered online, and having a reduced number of face to face meetings, would be considered as being blended/hybrid courses. A course would be classified as being an online course if more than 80% of it is delivered online; such courses typically have no face-to-face meetings between the students and the teachers. These have been tabulated in Table 1.

Following on with the generational framework, Anderson and Simpson (2012) present 'subsequent generations' of distance education, with a focus on asynchronous computer conferencing, synchronous audio and video conferencing, and a recognition of the need for interaction between the teacher and the students, and amongst the students enrolled in a course.

Table 1: Categorising courses

(Adapted from Allen & Seaman, 2016)

| Proportion of Content Delivered Online | Type of Course | Typical Description |
|--|-----------------|---|
| 0% | Traditional | Course where no online technology used—content is delivered in writing or orally |
| 1 to 29% | Web Facilitated | Course that uses web-based technology to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course. May use a learning management system (LMS) or web pages to post the syllabus and assignments. |
| 30 to 79% | Blended/Hybrid | Course that blends online and face-to-face delivery. Substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, typically uses online discussions, and typically has a reduced number of face-to-face meetings. |
| 80+% | Online | A course where most or all of the content is delivered online. Typically have no face-to-face meetings. |

It is, therefore, important to distinguish between synchronous and asynchronous modes of online learning. Synchronous online courses require both the students and the teacher to be available online at the same time (Shank & Sitze, 2004) and allows for real-time discussions.

Asynchronous courses do not require the students and the teacher to be online at the same time. They often have pre-recorded lecture videos or tutorials uploaded on a Learning Management System which students can view at their own convenience, or mandatory readings with assignments associated with them. Discussions amongst the participants, takes place on a web-based bulletin or message board. Due to the asynchronous nature of the discussions, there is a time-lag involved in getting a response to a message posted; communication occurs intermittently, anytime, and at irregular intervals (Forbes, 2012; Shank & Sitze, 2004).

The digital revolution in education simultaneously offers opportunities and challenges to higher education. Both modes of online education have the benefit of providing opportunities to attend university for those living in remote locations, for whom it may otherwise have been impossible to gain access to tertiary education. Nonetheless, there are significant differences between the two. The synchronous mode takes away the advantage of flexibility, which is most

often associated with distance education. Added to this is the reduced time that students would have to reflect prior to contributing a comment (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003; Shank & Sitze, 2004) and also issues related to technology, such as a poor Internet connection and power outages (Hendricks, 2016; Nagel & Kotze, 2010), which are particularly prevalent in third world countries. Asynchronous online courses are neither time-bound nor space-bound (Forbes, 2012), offering greater flexibility to those who have additional responsibilities, such as working full time along with studying (Crandall & Cunningham, 2017). At the same time, however, distance students have frequently expressed their inability to self-regulate their learning, including time-management issues (Hendricks, 2016; Sáiz, 2013). Often, distance learning offers a viable option to individuals who shy away from public interaction. The flip side to this is that distance education may also create a sense of isolation and alienation among the students, making it difficult for a community of inquiry to thrive (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Hendricks, 2016).

Although the Internet, distance education, and online learning have evolved at a much more rapid pace than higher education itself, the stigma of distance education being less valuable than conventional forms of face to face education still remains (Goralski & Falk, 2017). Over a span of 13 years, starting from 2003, the Babson Survey Research Group collected and presented data on online education in the United States of America on an annual basis. In their final report, published in 2016, Allen and Seaman reported that more than a quarter of higher education students were taking an online course. Despite this growth in the number of distance programmes and online courses, the acceptance of this learning modality by the teaching fraternity had not improved (Lee, 2017). This is demonstrated by the fact that only 29.1% of chief academic officers believed their faculty accepted the value and legitimacy of online education (Allen & Seaman, 2016).

The politics of technology

The previous section discussed the advantages that both synchronous and asynchronous modes of online learning have to offer—the main benefits centre around the flexibility and outreach that online learning has to offer. Owing to the rapid growth in online education, in terms of course offerings and student enrolment, a shift in policy documents related to online education has been observed. It has even been suggested that since online education has succeeded in

becoming an integral part of tertiary education, the central focus of policy should now be on increasing quality rather than increasing access to university education (Contact North, 2012).

Nonetheless, the use to technology to assist in delivery of course material has met with its share of criticism. The advantage of accessibility, most often cited by proponents of distance education, needs to be critically analysed, since a simple increase in the number of students enrolled does not automatically translate into an increase in accessibility of university education (Lee, 2017). When providing access to previously disadvantaged groups, universities need to keep in mind their special needs as well (Levin, 2007), since students from disadvantaged backgrounds need more support than students from affluent backgrounds (Guri-Rosenblit, 2009). Research also points towards the higher dropout rates in distance learning compared to traditional university classes (Levy, 2007).

The current literature suggests that students have not been as receptive to the idea of online education as proponents like to believe. Prensky (2001) coined the term ‘digital natives’ to refer to the students in the twenty-first century. Owing to the proliferation of technology in their lives, these students are markedly different from the students of the past. Prensky (2001) further asserted that this shift towards the adoption of technology in the education sector is irreversible. Despite the commonly held belief that students today are very adept with technology, the actual use of technology seems to be constrained and compromised (Henderson et al., 2015; Lai & Hong, 2015). Not all students are willing to conform to university-related technology use required for the various courses. In addition, while comparing the use of technology among different age groups of tertiary education students in New Zealand, Lai and Hong (2015) concluded that the use of digital technologies is not age dependent, and the range of technologies being used by students is limited across all age groups. Jelfs and Richardson (2013) found similar results for students enrolled in universities in the United Kingdom, confirming that the terms ‘digital natives’ and ‘net generation’ have little validity when it comes to using technology in education. In general, students’ engagement with digital technology is varied and shaped by a number of contextual factors. Directly attacking celebratory ideas of young people being ‘digital natives’, Facer & Selwyn (2013) believed that such terms “obscure the economic and social differences in young people’s lives and have been recruited as justification for political projects from individualised learning to the marketization of education systems” (p. 2).

Critics of online education also discussed the political economy and struggle over the distribution of power within which universities are adopting this mode of instruction. Recognising the transnational linkages offered by online education, these critics point to the frictions and contestations that go along with it. Universities are engaged in transnational politics, and they pull (and push) people, money, and knowledge across borders in highly skewed ways (Chou, Kamola, & Pietsch, 2016; Facer & Selwyn, 2013). Hamilton (2016) summarised the political environment of the emergence of digital education as follows:

In the context of shrinking budgets and state support, rising costs, questions of accountability, competition from non-traditional providers, bloated classrooms, and calls for greater integration into an emerging knowledge economy, online education appeared as more than a new set of tools...online education promised a solution to economic, organizational, and pedagogical problems in the traditional university...digital networks could serve as distribution systems for pre-packaged learning materials, designed by star faculty, mass produced at falling unit costs, and delivered by low-paid tutors. (pp. 1-2)

This debate started in the series of articles titled as the *Digital Diploma Mill*, by David Noble (1998). In an article of this series, published in 1999, Noble discussed the ‘automation and deprofessionalization’ of the teaching staff as universities move more towards online education. Noble used the following words to describe the future of university lecturers:

...educators confront the harsh realities of commodity production: speed-up, routinization of work, greater work discipline and managerial supervision, reduced autonomy, job insecurity, employer appropriation of the fruits of their labor, and, above all, the insistent managerial pressures to reduce labor costs in order to turn a profit. Thus, the commoditization of instruction leads invariably to the “proletarianization” or, more politely, the “deprofessionalization” of the professoriate. (Noble, 2000, p. 103)

Noble (2001) further argued that the same division of labour that has been witnessed in industries has made its way in education as well, where teams of specialists in course design, development, content, delivery, and distribution handle course instruction. In an industrial era, workers have become merely operators of machines, resulting in their creative and participatory sensibilities deadened (Kincheloe, 2003). Similarly, research in online education also focused on the ‘what-ifs’ and ‘best case’ examples of education and technology, without taking into account any individual and institutional barriers; a ‘means-end thinking’ approach is adopted, where thinking starts from a given end and then strives to find the means of

accomplishment. As a result, by doing a cost-benefit analysis, education is viewed as a means of achieving efficiency and digital education as adding value to it (Facer & Selwyn, 2013).

As universities strive to remain competitive in global education markets, delivering quality education becomes even more challenging for the teacher. Structural changes in universities need to be paralleled with relevant changes in pedagogical practices (Hamilton, 2016). Such changes are yet to be witnessed. Billions have been spent on developing computer hardware, software, peripherals, bandwidth, and the exploration of how technology is capable of supporting, assisting, and even enhancing the act of learning (Shor, Matusov, Maranovic-Shane, & Creswell, 2017). The reality still remains that “most of the *fundamental* elements of learning and teaching remain largely untouched by the potential of educational technology” (Facer & Selwyn, 2013; emphasis added). Additionally, critics say that there is scant evidence pointing to the expenditure being worth the cost when it comes to enhancing student learning and achievement. In an interview, Ira Shor explained this in a very practical way:

The political economy of digital preferences empowers the billionaire tech entrepreneurs, certainly, but neither the book nor the Nook reader are by themselves critical or uncritical as tools of pedagogy. We need to ask which tools are used in which ways for what purposes and with what results, to grasp the politics as well as the efficacy of a device or method. By themselves, then, books do not guarantee critical teaching or critical reading. A pen and paper to write an essay does not guarantee the development of a student’s critical literacy. Chalk and blackboards do not guarantee critical teaching...digital tech does not guarantee anything critical about the process of learning...At the very least, research has confirmed that physical activities between classes enhances student attention and that small classes enhance the achievement of students, especially low-income ones, but the hegemonic power of tech in society ignores this research and forces tech purchases on schools regardless, at a time when the public sector budget is in decline (Shor et al., 2017).

This lack of concrete evidence in support of the benefits of distance education raises questions about its effectiveness, paving way for further research into how this mode of education can be moulded to ensure that it does deliver what it is expected from it.

Dialogue in online education: Completing full circle

This chapter began with a discussion of what dialogue is, and what role it plays as a pedagogical tool. Having discussed critical reflection, learning theories, and the use of technology in

promoting online education, this section will complete full circle for this chapter by discussing the place of dialogue in the context of online education.

The underlying assumption in Freire's dialogic pedagogy is the development of meaningful dialogue between the student and teacher, or even among the students themselves. Gilbert and Dabbagh (2005) defined meaningful communication between students as "the ability of learners to demonstrate critical thinking skills by (a) relating course content to prior knowledge and experience, (b) interpreting content through the analysis, synthesis, and evaluations of others' understanding, and (c) making inferences" (p. 6). In order to develop this communication, the virtual learning environment is increasingly making use of emerging Web 2.0 technologies, such as discussion forums, student blogs, class wiki projects, twitter exchanges, online social networking, and video presentations on YouTube (Friedman & Friedman, 2013). Instead of one-way communication, these technologies allow users to interact with each other by allowing them to not only read, but also respond, add to, or alter the content available online. The most common form of communication in online education is through discussion forums, both in fully distance programmes and in blended learning programmes. Such discussions are often threaded, where replies to preceding posts build up one or more threads (Lander, 2014).

Research supports the use of threaded discussion forums to communicate asynchronously. Their use has proven to improve students' perceived learning and enhance students' academic performance (Wu & Hiltz, 2004). When discussion activities are properly designed, they have been shown to promote higher-order critical and thinking skills (Swan et al., 2000). Since discussions are simply not possible without reciprocity, the shift to Web 2.0 technologies has brought dialogue in the online learning environment closer to face to face interactions. The use of interactive technologies, such as discussion forums, is anchored within social constructivist pedagogical rationales (which have been discussed later in this chapter) and communication via them enables collaborative construction of knowledge through text-based interaction. Even a superficial examination of an asynchronous online discussion shows that it has elements of both conversations (for example, greetings, naming of others) and the use of pedagogical strategies (questions are asked and answered, and answers are sometimes evaluated) (Lander, 2014).

At the same time, several constraints of the use of discussion forums have also been recognised in the existing literature. These centre around the chronological and hierarchical structure of

the threads posted in these forums, which hinders the development of new ideas, makes it difficult to keep the discussions focused, and may prevent effective discussions from happening (Sun & Gao, 2017). These platforms also do not provide the same degree of promptness that is there in the conventional, face-to-face environment. They are not a perfect substitute for spoken language—spoken language is fleeting, whereas asynchronous forms of communication are more permanent, whereby the conversation is written down (Delahunty, 2018). These written forms of communication, which characterise asynchronous online education, resemble more of what Bakhtin (1986) called ‘dialect’:

Take a dialogue and remove the voices (the portioning of voices), remove the intonations (emotional and individualising ones), carve out abstract concepts and judgements from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness – and that’s how you get dialects. (Bakhtin, 1986, p 147, as cited in Dafermos, 2018, p. 47)

Dialogue is more creative, since it is spontaneous in nature. In writing, we have time to go over, revise and polish our first attempt to produce something more fixed and permanent (Yakubinsky, 1923). Barnes (1992) relates this to exploratory talk and ‘final draft’ talk in education. Given the opportunity to discuss new ideas in small group discussion activities, students learn more, since talk that is extemporaneous, i.e. spontaneous, unrehearsed, and improvised on the spur of the moment, is more liberal. Compared to this, monologue, like written text, may be more conservative, since the speaker or writer revises each thought repeatedly to make sure they do not get engaged in controversial issues. Agreeing with this, Skidmore (2016b) argued that “it may be that the imperfections, slips and tentative locutions characteristic of exploratory talk in small group discussion in the classroom are an important part of creating the attitude of mental permeability that is needed for developmental learning to occur: the sense that one’s mind is open to enquiry in this realm of knowledge.” (p 21) Proponents of online education, however, argue in favour of the time lag prevalent in asynchronous modes of distance learning. They contest that communicating in an asynchronous mode facilitates those students who shy away from face to face interaction in a conventional classroom environment. It also allows students to write well-articulated responses to the topics being discussed.

The actual experience for adults participating in online learning contexts has been the focus of numerous recent studies. Most express dissatisfaction with the modes of participation, reporting that these discussions do not meet expectations in two main aspects: students’ failure to reach higher levels of knowledge construction and their sometimes negative emotional

reactions to participations. Often, adult learners view participation in asynchronous discussions as an added burden, particularly when they are already managing other commitments alongside education (Bailie, 2017; Delahunty, 2018; Lander, 2014). Research also provides evidence on an active role of the lecturer (sometimes referred to as the facilitator) in facilitating discussions, to ensure that students do, in fact, engage in these online discussions and learn from them. Educators must know how to effectively facilitate the co-construction of knowledge, which requires that students feel they are being listened to and that their contributions are valued (Delahunty, 2018; North, Coffin, & Hewings, 2008, Oliver & Shaw, 2003). Some have even suggested that education institutions should develop strategies to increase student enrolment based on deeper understandings of students' preferences of online communication (Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, & Chang, 2003).

Little has been done to see how these discussion forums may be useful avenues for self-evaluation by teachers, where they can use content from these to critically reflect on their own pedagogical approaches. Schön (1983, 1987) claimed that that teaching is marked with such uncertainty that teachers cannot merely apply what they have learned to all situations in a uniform manner. Thoughtful and contextualised actions to better achieve learning outcomes can only be possible if teachers reflect on their teaching practice – they 'look back on events, make judgements about them, and then alter their teaching behaviors in light of craft, research and ethical knowledge' (Valli, 1997). By exploring how online educators use subject matter from discussion forums to critically reflect on their own pedagogy, this study aims to bridge the gap existing in the current literature, and discuss how critical reflection can lead to better learning outcomes in an online learning environment.

Conclusion

Tracing the evolution of learning theories, and the development of tools that assist in online education, seems to suggest that distance education in general, and online education in particular, are moving away from what Freire termed 'banking education' towards what he called 'problem-posing education'. A deeper examination into the political environment surrounding the transition of universities towards online education seems to suggest otherwise. By relating the existing literature to the data I have collected, subsequent chapters will investigate which of these aspects is relevant in the experience of participants.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This research contributes to the existing evidence related to how online educators critically reflect on their pedagogy, based on their dialogue with their students in an online teaching and learning environment. Every inquiry, upon which research is based, begins with some perplexity, confusion, or doubt (Quay, Bleazby, Stolz & Webster, 2018). In the process of defining that inquiry, it is imperative to outline the boundaries within which the research will be conducted. This includes identifying the research philosophy, paradigm, principles, and methodology within which the context of the research will be situated (Newby, 2014). This chapter details how each of these have been carefully chosen to be applied to my research.

Methodology

Before discussing the research methodology used for this study, it is important to distinguish between ‘research methodology’ and ‘research methods’, in order to clarify that these terms cannot be used interchangeably (Newby, 2014; van Manen, 2016b). Methodology refers to “the theoretical, political and philosophical backgrounds to social research and their implications for research practice and for the use of particular methods” (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Some examples of these include case study, grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, and evaluation research. In discussing research methodology, one needs to articulate how research tools (questionnaires, interviews, observation, statistical analysis) will be put together and how research rules will be applied to these (Newby, 2014). On the other hand, research methods refers to the procedures used to acquire and analyse the data that has been used to create knowledge (Petty et al., 2012), which may include questionnaires, observation, statistical analysis and interviews (Newby, 2014). By gathering data from the experiences of others, we become more “in-formed” or experienced ourselves (van Manen, 2016b).

I will begin by discussing the theoretical and philosophical backgrounds relevant to my research. Doing so will lend support to my choice of methods used and also the particular tools used to collect data. Where appropriate, I will simultaneously be analysing and discussing how each of the relevant ideas have been used in my research.

Research Paradigm

A paradigm may be seen as a set of basic beliefs, or a worldview, that defines the nature of the world and an individual's place in it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Working within a research paradigm means working with a set of rules that determine the research procedures; this, in turn, helps shape the research question. Simply put, it links the research philosophy to the practice of research (Newby, 2014). To justify which paradigm my research will be situated in, it is essential to first distinguish between quantitative and qualitative paradigms. Scientific research is heavily inclined towards the use of quantitative data, that is, collection of data in numerical form, which gives quantifiable answers to questions that are being probed. Scientism argues that research can be proper only if it follows the methods and adopts the standards that have been developed within the natural sciences; that is, it should follow a rigorous and methodical approach of observation, experimentation and testing. Data is collected to test pre-existing theoretical ideas and concepts, making the inquiry process deductive in nature. In general, the methodology and data used should be reliable (consistent over time and with different observers), valid (it actually measures what it intended to), replicable (can be repeated to verify the findings) and generalisable (based on a representative sample of the entire population) (Newby, 2014; Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Qualitative research makes use of inductive logic, where data is first collected, and theoretical ideas and concepts then emerge from it. Research in education has increasingly made use of qualitative research approaches (Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012), especially since these focus on meanings within certain contexts. Thus, phenomena are understood in their natural setting (Robson & McCartan, 2016). While this approach yields results that offer interesting insights to similar contexts, these results are, however, not considered generalisable. Qualitative research uses a variety of methodologies, including grounded theory, case study, phenomenology, ethnography and narrative research (Petty, Thomson, & Stew, 2012). Although qualitative research emerged as a field of inquiry in the late twentieth century, empiricist philosophers such as John Locke had introduced the concept of different kinds of qualities much before that, debating over the dichotomy between the subjective and the objective (Brinkmann, Jacobsen, & Kristiansen, 2014). Today, qualitative research is interdisciplinary, and substantial work has been done in fields like psychology, sociology, anthropology, social work, social policy, humanities, education, and the health sciences. Ways

of collecting data, or the methods used for qualitative analysis include, among others, focus groups, interviews, participant observation, photo-voice, and storytelling (Spencer, Pryce, & Walsh, 2014).

Qualitative research is intrinsically multi-method, which makes it crucial for researchers to justify the research methods and methodology used for their study. To not do so may make the research appear to be dishonest or inaccurate, and may fail to situate the findings of the study in their correct context (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014). The following sections define the research philosophy, methodology, research methods and principles of ethics that were adhered to while I conducted my research.

Research Philosophy

The research philosophy shapes a researcher's views and values about the world. It can have an ethical or a political dimension to it, describing what is important to the researcher. This, in turn, has an influence on what the researcher chooses to read and how to go about the research process. More formally, the research philosophy is shaped by the ontological and epistemological standpoints of the researcher. Ontology relates to the nature of being; since the nature of reality differs for each individual, the ontology influences what constitutes knowledge for each being. This not only determines the researchers beliefs about what should be researched, but also how the researcher interprets the results of the research (Newby, 2014). Epistemology describes how the researcher came to know that knowledge; having firm epistemological foundations helps researchers to "be sure" of their interpretation of the evidence they collected (Newby, 2014, p. 36). Owing to the unique ontological and epistemological values of each individual, no two researchers can have the exact same interpretation of data (Daniel & Harland, 2017). This is particularly true for qualitative research, where each researcher interprets and attaches meaning to data and observations differently.

The *Cartesian split* dominated Western philosophy for about 300 – 400 years. Briefly, what Descartes suggested was that the mind could be removed from the world, that is, the object and subject could be separated (Vagle, 2016). Along with the Cartesian tradition, the Hobbesian and Lockean traditions also asserted that when we are conscious, we are aware of only ourselves or our own ideas, and not of objects around us (Sokolowski, 1999). This essentially meant that researchers were expected to be objective in analysing data, separating themselves from the phenomena being investigated. By developing a new strand of philosophy –

phenomenology – Edmund Husserl was the first to ‘put together what Descartes had separated’ by arguing that the connection between the subject and objects was inseparable – the human conscious was always conscious *of* something. Subsequent phenomenological philosophers (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre) distanced their phenomenological ideas further from the Cartesian split, by conceiving intentionality as a commitment to the idea of connection between the subject (humans) and the object (things, ideas, concepts) (Vagle, 2016).

Phenomenology is the study of phenomenon – in other words, of the world as it appears to experiencing and acting human beings (Brinkmann et al., 2014; Eberle, 2014; Newby, 2014). It is the study of our world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than how we conceptualise, categorise or reflect on it. Reflection on these lived experiences is always recollective in nature, since it is based on an experience that has already passed (van Manen, 2016b). Beginning with concepts revolving around consciousness and experience, phenomenology later widened to encompass concepts related to human life world and to take account of the presence of the researcher in the context being investigated (Brinkmann et al, 2014; McWilliam, 2010). There are several broad categories of phenomenological research: descriptive, interpretive, hermeneutic, and post-intentional, to name a few (McWilliam, 2010; Vagle & Hofsess, 2016). In what follows, each of the categories of phenomenology are discussed in detail, with the intention of situating my research in its proper context. The sequence followed for discussing these categories is not chronological, the reason for which is grounded in Brinkmann et al. (2014). The authors contest that it is possible to delineate and delimit the field whose history is being recounted; this gives room for the existence of more than one history to exist, depending on how events are grouped together. ‘The Internal History of Qualitative Research’ drafted out by Brinkmann et al. (2014) has thus been used as the guiding principle while discussing the various categories of phenomenology.

Descriptive phenomenology, founded by Husserl, requires the researcher to suspend any preconceived notions in order to deeply understand the phenomena being investigated (Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixsmith, 2013). With the unit of analysis as the phenomenon, a key assumption of this phenomenological methodology is that the phenomenon has an essence. What Husserl meant by ‘essence’ is often debated and critiqued; in simpler terms, Husserl advocated that every phenomenon has a structure and that it can be described (Vagle, 2016). Descriptive phenomenology is epistemological in nature, that is, it aims to describe the general characteristics or ‘essence’ of phenomena rather than the individual’s experiences by putting aside extraneous factors (such as religion or culture) that could influence how a

phenomenon is understood (Tuohy et al., 2013). Husserl labelled this phenomenological reduction as *epoché*, or bracketing, which involves “suspending judgement of the existence and pre-understandings of things outside of the human mind” (Vagle, 2016, p. 30), so that a phenomenon can be studied without any a priori assumptions.

Although a student of Husserl, Martin Heidegger’s ideas departed from those of his teacher in significant ways. He developed what is called ‘interpretive phenomenology’. Although the unit of analysis is again the phenomenon (Vagle, 2016), Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* put forward the idea of ‘ontological hermeneutics’, which is to understand humans as “creatures that are affected by what happens, can understand their worlds, and communicate with others” (Brinkmann et al., 2014). Interpretive phenomenologists, therefore, recognise the presence of the researcher, and that their lived experiences shape their interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated (Eberle, 2014; McWilliam, 2010; Tuohy et al., 2013).

Phenomenology has often been criticised by qualitative researchers for its focus on the existence of a structure to a phenomenon and the relations that characterise that phenomenon (Vagle, 2016). The most significant modifications to Husserl’s concept of ‘essence’ have been made by Giorgi (2009). Although Giorgi spoke of finding the essence of the phenomenon as being important in his earlier work (1985, 1997), he has distanced himself from it in his recent work (2009). Nonetheless, Giorgi (2009) still advocates for ‘searching for invariant meanings that belong to a structure’ rather than finding the universal essence of a phenomenon. This is to be done while practicing psychological phenomenological reduction, which is to “use human consciousness to study human consciousness” but at the same time, the researcher is to “bracket his or her understandings and knowledge in order to be able to analyse the raw data from a fresh perspective” (Vagle, 2016, pp. 58-59).

Brinkmann et al. (2014) considered hermeneutic phenomenology to be the most important philosophical tradition to have informed qualitative inquiry; van Manen went so far as to say that “all or much of phenomenology has hermeneutic (interpretive) elements” (2016a, p. 23). Hermeneutics is the art of interpretation and is thus fundamental to much, if not all, qualitative research (Ezzy, 2013). Originally developed to interpret biblical texts, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833 – 1911) extended it to human life, conceiving it as an ongoing process of interpretation (Gadamer, 2013). For Max van Manen, one of the principal proponents of this approach as a research method, hermeneutic phenomenology is an “attitude or disposition of sensitivity and openness: it is a matter of openness to everyday, experienced meanings as opposed to

theoretical ones” (Freisen et al., 2012). Contributions were also made by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty (Brinkmann et al., 2014).

Van Manen advocated writing and rewriting as being central to phenomenological research. Doing so allows the researcher to not only explore meaning structures of the actual phenomenon, situation or event systematically, but at the same time, it allows the researcher a space to express, acknowledge, and accept the pre-reflective substrata of the actual experience (Bjorbakmo, Evensen, Griven, Rugseth, & Standal, 2018). Drawing on van Manen’s work, Bjorbakmo et al. (2018) further contested that:

In the phenomenological research, data generation, analysis and writing are intertwined. During the process of writing and rewriting, the epoché and the reduction enable the researcher to attend to an attitude that involves a fascination with the moment, with the uniqueness of an experience or event. While the epoché involves opening up and freeing oneself from obstacles in order to approach the phenomenon of our lifeworld, the reduction is about engaging a reflective phenomenological attitude, one which seeks to address the uniqueness of the phenomenon as it shows itself in its singularity. Reflecting on the moment or event that has made us wonder demands patience as well as the ability and willingness to discover and understand the unexpected. (pp. 21–22)

Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nystrom (2008) developed *reflective lifeworld research*, which included elements of both Husserlian (descriptive, transcendental) and Heideggarian (interpretive, hermeneutic) phenomenologies. In order to ensure that openness to the phenomenon is not compromised, they argued that the researcher must practice bridling. Dahlberg (2006) used the term bridling as a metaphor; similar to how the reins of a horse need to be tightened and then slacked while riding it, Dahlberg described intentionality as the “threads that connect us with the world and that these threads could never be cut off but could be tightened and loosened” (Vagle, Hughes & Durbin, 2009, p. 349). While Husserl’s ‘bracketing’ expected researchers to suspend their own assumptions about the phenomenon altogether, Dahlberg’s bridling expects that researchers bracket their pre-understandings so that they do not limit their openness to understanding new aspects of the phenomenon. At the same time, bridling ensured that the researcher remained open to understanding the phenomenon as a whole throughout the study, and did not attempt to make definite what is indefinite (Vagle, Hughes, & Durbin, 2009). In other words, bridling is more dynamic in nature, whereby “researchers attempt to become much more familiar with their judgements so they do not compromise their openness to the phenomenon” (Vagle, 2016, p. 31).

Extending the work of Heidegger, Gadamer, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, Vagle (2016) developed the concept of post-intentional phenomenology, which “serves as a space in which post- ideas and phenomenological ideas can be put together to see what happens” (p. 124). Sokolowski (1999) identified parts and wholes as one of three structural forms consistently appearing in all phenomenological analyses (the other two being identity in a manifold and, presence and absence). Vagle (2016) took this a step further by talking about whole-part-whole analysis as being a fundamental precept of post-intentional phenomenology; this allows the researcher to interpret data in new ways, and derive new meanings and understandings about the phenomenon they are studying. While early phenomenology was interested in the essence of the phenomena, post-intentional phenomenology is more interested in the ‘lines of flight’ that phenomena can take (Vagle & Hofsess, 2016). In other words, “in old phenomenology, the goal was to determine the essential structure a phenomenon ‘has’. In post-intentional phenomenology the goal is to see what the phenomenon might become.” (Vagle, 2016, p. 155). This makes post-intentional phenomenology a philosophy of social change – the complexities and tentative understandings are essential to understand the ever-changing nature of social, ethical, and political relations.

The philosophical ideas guiding my research are grounded in phenomenology, whereby I aimed for “fresh, complex, rich descriptions of a phenomenon as it is concretely lived” (Finlay, 2012, p. 23). More precisely, I relied on Vagle’s conception of post-intentional phenomenology (2016). Extending Dahlberg’s notion on bridling, Vagle suggests that researchers not get too attached to their initial thoughts about the phenomenon they are investigating. This was particularly important for me, as my prior involvement with teaching in a blended learning environment had shaped my beliefs about distance learning and teaching. My experience had been in facilitating synchronous online teaching whereas this study was about asynchronous online teaching; making use of bridling ensured that I remained open to the experiences of the participants and how their own critical reflection depended upon the quality of dialogue that developed between them and their students during the semester. During my research, I also tried to resist binary and rigid thinking such as either-or, right-wrong, or normal-abnormal. Instead, I tried to remain open, flexible and contemplative in my thinking and decision making. In order to do so, I followed the five-step research methodology proposed by Vagle (2016).

As suggested by Vagle (2016), these steps do not have to be followed linearly, but in an open and shifting cyclical pattern. Applied to my own research process, each of these five components were revisited iteratively. The first step involved the identification of a post-

intentional phenomenon around a social issue (Vagle, 2016). As must already be clear to the reader, the phenomenon identified by me is the use of dialogue in online teaching and learning environments. Although this research started off as an investigation into the effective use of dialogue in the online platform, revisiting my initial proposal after doing a comprehensive literature review of this topic allowed me to refine it further; my research now aims to gain insights about how online educators critically reflect on their pedagogical approach based on the dialogue they have with their students in the online teaching and learning environment. During this step, I also chose the theories I wanted to think with. Post-intentional phenomenology treats all knowledge and all philosophical ideas as being “partial, fleeting, malleable, and ever-changing” (Vagle, 2016, p. 163). This allowed me to anchor my selection of phenomenology over critical theory as a methodology, especially since my research finds its theoretical foundations in the work of Dewey and Freire. While doing critical research in education, using one methodology cannot satisfy the range of views needed; at the same time, no methodology can be eliminated without due examination. Employing such context specific, varied views in research is called *bricolage* (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). This involves making use of appropriate research strategies from a variety of disciplines and traditions as they are needed in unfolding context of the research situation. These strategies can range from the use of an “ethnography, textual analysis, semiotics, deconstruction, critical hermeneutics, interviews, phonemic analysis, psychoanalysis, rhizomatics, content analysis, survey research and phenomenology” (Steinberg, 2015, p. 12). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) give freedom to the researcher to range freely, but carefully, between these approaches to research, and making use of appropriate ones depending on the context at hand (as cited in Benade, 2017). Rather than being rigid in my methodology and methods, I too employed a *bricolage*, making use of techniques that suited the context of my research. I varied the context of my research as well. Initially, I had intended to limit my research to educators who were teaching in a blended learning environment. As I struggled to get educators to participate, I realised that extending my research to include educators teaching online courses of various types will not compromise on my results. On the contrary, getting such varying perspectives proved to be beneficial to my research.

The second step involved gathering phenomenological material appropriate for the phenomenon under investigation (Vagle, 2016). The guiding principle in post-intentional phenomenology is to be open and creative about how the data will be collected. In line with this, I chose to use two sources to gather data: interviews and reflective journals. Both are

discussed in detail in subsequent sections of this chapter. The third step involved making a post-reflection plan (Vagle, 2016). I did not follow a specific timetable according to how frequently I would be reflecting on the data I gathered. I did make sure that I penned my thoughts down the very next day after each interview. I would listen to the recorded interview at least two to three times the next day, pausing it where I felt there were important insights being made, and write about them in relation to my own experiences. I particularly paid attention to aspects that were surprising for me, and contemplated on how to develop meanings about the experience of my participants. Also, once I had the transcripts of the interviews ready, I would read and re-read them, and again wrote about what I considered as being important points being made by my participants. I also read and reread the reflective journals that my participants had written several times, and wrote about my interpretations of their critical reflections on their professional practice. I also wrote in my journal whenever a new idea came to my mind, whether this was while I was out for a walk, or engaged in one or many of the other roles I have in my personal life. Since this research was done to fulfil the requirements of a professional degree, I was limited by the time I had during which I could keep going back to the data and reflecting over it. Nonetheless, documenting my reflection proved to be invaluable as I wrote Chapter Five of this thesis, where I discussed my findings; if this documentation had not been there, I might not have been able to recall many of the instances where I was able to read the body language of my participants and found important cues in them, especially since the findings were discussed about two months after the data had been collected.

The fourth step involved exploring the post-intentional phenomenon using theory, phenomenological material, and post reflections (Vagle, 2016). The distinguishing feature of post-intentional phenomenology is to deconstruct the whole phenomenon, relate it to theories one has chosen to think with, and with one's own post-reflection (Vagle, 2016), and then look for "lines of flight" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, as quoted in Vagle, 2016). This meant that I searched for instances where I had retreated to either/or thinking, instances where I appeared "certain" of what something meant, instances where something did not seem to fit, and how I challenged myself to learn from such misfits about the phenomenon I was investigating (Vagle, 2016). Each of these 'lines of flight' were then related to the existing literature to see whether it was in agreement with it, or added new layers of understanding by negating what it said. The exercise of this step is evident in Chapter Five of this thesis.

The final step involved crafting a text that engaged the production and provocations of the post-intentional phenomenon (Vagle, 2016). This step was done iteratively until I had a final draft of each chapter ready. Putting together the chapters to form a complete thesis involved a further revision of each chapter to ensure there were no repetitions, and that no aspect was missed out while describing this research in detail. As Vagle (2016) postulated, this was a long and involved process, and included varying combinations of interpretations, theorizing, and post reflections.

Case Study

As a research methodology, phenomenology is “to study what it is like as we *find-ourselves-being-in-relation-with-others* (e.g., teacher with students, nurse with patient, therapist with client) and *other things* (e.g., a good book, some bad news, our favourite activity, an anxiety)” (Vagle, 2016, p. 21). In order to study the relationship between teachers and students, and how teachers construct notions of this relationship within a particular context, I elected to use ‘phenomenological case studies’, where each participant formed one case unit. There are numerous definitions of a case study: Newby (2014) defines it as a “detailed analysis of an individual circumstance or event that is chosen either because it is typical or because it is unusual or because there was a problem or because something worked well” (p. 51); Stake (1995) discusses it as the singularity and complexity of a single instance that needs to be understood in its particular context; Tight (2010) defines it as a “detailed examination of a small sample” (p. 337). I deliberately use the term phenomenological case studies, since I have tried to record and interpret the lived experience of each online lecturer. In line with this, I first summarise my findings in Chapter Four individually for each participant, and then find elements common to their experiences and group them together as themes.

As an increasingly popular approach among qualitative researchers, current approaches to case study are shaped by paradigm, study design, and selection of methods. Consequently, there is wide variation in the way case studies are conducted and reported in the published literature. These differences make it challenging for researchers to define and understand case study as a methodology (Hyett et al., 2014). Popular case study approaches in qualitative studies include the social constructivist approach proposed by Stake (1995), and the post-positivist viewpoint, proposed by Yin (2011) and Flyvbjerg (2011). My research falls within interpretive methods; as has already been stated, this research has been informed by my own lived experiences, making me (the researcher) inseparable from the reality. I have also interpreted my findings in

light of my own lived experience, and made use of post-intentional phenomenology since it allowed me the freedom to identify ‘lines of flight’. While discussing my findings, however, I have addressed the implications of my subjectivity (Weber, 2004)

Newby (2014) identified three purposes for which case studies can be used: exploration, explanation and description. When the purpose is exploration, research is carried out to throw light on something that the researcher has not encountered before, or something that requires deeper understanding. Explanation usually starts with an assumption of what will happen, or explain some sort of outcome that has already happened. Descriptive case studies record or describe a situation. With my interest in finding out how teachers construct their notions of critical reflection while teaching online, my research is more aligned with an exploratory case study. Such case studies are heuristic in nature, with the intention of increasing understanding of the case by discovering new meaning, extending the reader’s experience, or confirming what is already known (Newby, 2014).

Depending on the overall objective of the research, a single, multiple, holistic or embedded case study can be used. Holistic and embedded case studies revolve around not only the research issue at hand, but also try to develop an understanding of the organisational culture within which the case is situated. Single case studies focus on one event or one instance in order to understand it better. Multiple case studies are designed to be either repetitive or comparative, which made them appropriate to be used for my research (Newby, 2014). As I began my research, I considered each participant as one case unit, and their personal experiences of teaching in an online teaching and learning environment was scaffolded to identify not only unique characteristics, but also common themes across them. Once I had collected my data, however, I realised that the experience of each participant was specific to their organisation’s culture as well. In particular, an understanding of why the institution at which they were teaching had decided to offer online courses was essential to understand their experiences of teaching in an online teaching and learning environment. This resulted in my case studies overlapping between being considered as a single case study and as a holistic (or embedded) case study.

As with any other methodology, the use of case studies has its drawbacks (Newby, 2014); effort was made to keep their impact as low as possible. Since participants are sometimes reluctant to share their actual experiences, the interview questions were framed in a manner to ensure the participants that there was no right or wrong answer, but that *their* experiences mattered to

the researcher. This is also in line with phenomenological research, which is the guiding philosophical principle of my study. It is also believed that participants are sometimes economical with what they say, revealing only part of the truth (Newby, 2014). Efforts were made to minimise this by assuring participants that their identity would not be revealed to their colleagues, and that any excerpts being used from their interviews would be kept anonymous. Participants may also forget part of an event if there is a considerable time lapse between when it happened and when data is collected (Newby, 2014). Interviews with the participants were therefore scheduled at the start and immediately after the end of my data collection phase to ensure that the participants did not forget any important insights they gained during this semester. The use of reflective journals and screen shots further helped participants keep a record of parts of dialogue with their students that made them critically reflect as and when it happened. The boundaries of this case study were also carefully defined at the outset of the research. It included only those educators who had recently transitioned into teaching in an online teaching and learning environment, but had previously been teaching in a face-to-face environment. The time frame during which participants were to document evidence was set as the first seven weeks of the semester; this was chosen so that there were no gaps in interaction between the lecturers and their students.

Research methods

As already explained in the preceding section, research methods are the techniques used to collect data for analysis. A wide range of methods can be made use of while doing a case study, some of which are documentary sources, statistics, external reports, interviews, observations, and questionnaires. (Newby, 2014). Some contemporary phenomenologists, such as Dahlberg, Dahlberg and Nystrom (2008) and Vagle (2016) express their commitment to openness regarding gathering of phenomenological material, whereby researchers should not be restricted to conventional techniques such as interviews, observations and written descriptions, but should also collect data from artistic forms such as drawings and paintings, if the phenomenon under observation requires them to do so. This study made use of interviews to collect data from the participants. Additionally, participants were asked to maintain reflective journals to document evidence of their critical reflective practice during the first seven weeks of the semester. These journals supported and improved my understanding of the experiences of the participants. Both research methods yielded data that was recollective in nature, that is,

they were descriptions of experiences that had already been lived. This implies that experiential accounts, whether written or oral, are never identical to the lived experience itself—they are a transformation of those experiences (van Manen, 2016b). Collecting data from more than one source about the same lived experience is called triangulation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Doing so increased the credibility of the study and thereby provided sound justifications for my results.

Interviews

Interviews are one of the most frequently used tools in qualitative research (Forsey, 2012), and are often considered the ‘gold standard’ of qualitative research (Rosaline, 2008). For Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), qualitative research interviews are conducted for the “purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena” (p. 3). When used for the purpose of research, in-depth interviews provide the advantage of creating a depth of understanding that would not have been possible through surveys, casual conversations between individuals, informal interviewing, or focus group. This information may include very personal matters, such as lived experiences of the individual, values and decisions, occupational ideology, cultural knowledge, or perspective (Forsey, 2012; Johnson & Rowlands, 2012).

The use of conversations for producing knowledge is as old as the existence of human language and communication. Ancient Greek philosophers used dialogue to create knowledge about questions related to truth and justice, and also to document history. In the 1900s, Sigmund Freud made use of interviews to develop his psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious. More recently, interviews have been used widely to document industrial research and consumerism. Postmodern conceptions of interviews include the neo-positivist view (where conversation reveals the ‘true self’ of the person being interviewed), romantic conceptions (where the interviewer assists the interviewee to shape thoughts from his or her inner psyche) and transformative conceptions (where interviews provide dialogic and transformative opportunities to different kinds of people to come together for action) (Brinkmann, 2014). How one conceptualises the research approach clearly helps determine the style of interview used (Forsey, 2012).

The justification of the use of interviews for my research stemmed from the work of Giorgi (2009), where he gave a detailed process for data collection and analysis. Although he acknowledged the use of written descriptions as phenomenological data, he emphasised the use and importance of interviews for data collection. Vagle (2016) also acknowledges the use of unstructured interviews as the most popular technique for gathering data by phenomenologists, since they are “dialogic, open and conversational” (p. 105). Advocating that all data that has been collected has to be analysed, Giorgi (2009) recommended having interviews that are not too long. This principle was adhered to in my research, and all interviews that I conducted were limited to a duration of one hour.

Whether in-depth interviews are the suitable way of data collection depends on the nature of the research question. When research questions are exploratory or descriptive in nature, or where different individuals or groups involved in the same line of activity have complicated, multiple perspectives on some phenomena, then in-depth interviews are likely the suitable research method (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012). This is because the interviewer aims to achieve the same deep level of knowledge and understanding as that held by the participants. Deep understandings aim to go beyond rational perceptions, explanations and understandings of lived experiences, with the intention to uncover what is “usually hidden from ordinary view or reflection or to penetrate to more reflective understandings about the nature of that experience” (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012).

During interviews, it is important to ensure interviewees feel comfortable, so that they talk about their experiences freely and openly. In general, there are no right or wrong answers in qualitative interviews, and the interviewer is looking for anything that the interviewee can come up with (Forsey, 2012). Some interviews are, however, more fruitful than others—they are richer in both opinions and residues (Roulston, 2010; van Manen, 2016b). Opening interviews by asking the least probing questions, or icebreakers, and moving gradually to more probing ones, signal an interest in the person and the stories they have to tell, and usually help warm the interviewee to the topic and the process. In an ideal situation, once trust is developed between the researcher and participants, the participants become collaborative partners of the researcher (van Manen, 2016; Forsey, 2012; Johnson & Rowlands, 2012; Rosaline, 2008). Anticipating that I needed time to develop rapport with my participants so that they would freely share their experiences with me, my research was designed so that I met with each participant twice. The first interview proved to be an ice-breaker between me and each of my participants. During this interview, we talked about their past experience and their journey as

an educator, the expectations they had about the paper they were teaching in that particular semester, and so on. In the second interview, I felt that each participant was much more relaxed, and did not seem hesitant in sharing their personal experiences of teaching in an online environment, even if it meant that they were not pleased with the way in which the students were participating in the online discussion forums.

Interviews range from being structured to unstructured. Both Brinkmann (2014) and Vagle (2016) argue that there is no such thing as a completely structured interview, just as there is no such thing as a completely unstructured interview. The dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee always spills beyond the structure the interviewer may have in mind. Similarly, by attempting to limit an interview within a pre-designed structure, researchers risk leaving out knowledge and meanings that may be central to understanding their object of study. Conversely, because interviewers often have an idea of what they want to elicit from an interview, they may intentionally steer it accordingly, implying that there can be no such thing as a completely unstructured interview. Ideally, then, an interview should be “flexible enough for interviewees to be able to raise questions and concerns in their own words and from their own perspectives” (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 285), or more like semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews make use of dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee to produce knowledge together. At the same time, the interviewer can steer the conversations to focus on issues that he or she feels are important for the purpose of his or her research. Phenomenological researchers are more likely to follow open-ended or semi-structured interviews (Forsey, 2012; Rosaline, 2008). In line with this, I elected to use semi-structured interviews for collecting data. Being flexible with my questions allowed me to capture the true essence of the experiences of my participants. At the same time, I made sure I covered all important questions that are essential for me to capture in-depth data for analysing and reaching definitive conclusions regarding the experiences of my participants about reflecting in an online learning environment. Appendix 1 lists the indicative questions that I asked my participants during the two interviews. It should be noted, however, that the sequence of these questions varied. Also, I made sure I went over the recording of the first interview with each participant a day before the second interview was scheduled with them. I then added questions to the list of questions for the second, which were specific for each participant in relation to what they had said in the first interview. These questions were about the specific pedagogical tools each of them had intended to use, and what they were expecting from themselves and their students during the first seven weeks of the semester.

Rather than having group interviews, or focus groups, I chose individual interviews for data collection. It is not only easier to lead conversations into directions useful for the researcher in an individual interview, but it also allows studying aspects of personal and sensitive experiences that the interviewee may not be willing to share if discussed within a focus group (Brinkmann, 2014). Individual interviews also allow for confidentiality, which was of utmost importance to my participants. Also, since all my participants were not teaching at the same institution, there were some institution-specific factors influencing their experiences. This made the use of a group interview an inappropriate method for my research. Each interview was conducted face-to-face, in the office of the interviewee. Conducting this interview myself allowed me access to not only have a conversation with the interviewee, but also to information contained in their gestures, body language, and facial expressions (Brinkmann, 2014; Hammersley, 2012). Brinkmann (2014) also advises that in order to note all the nonverbal signs and gestures that occurred, it is best that interviewers transcribe the conversations themselves, and that too should be done relatively soon after the interview takes place. Given the paucity of time, and my own inexperience in transcribing interviews, I chose to get my interviews transcribed by a professional. The confidentiality agreement signed by the transcriber is attached as appendix 2.

Reflective journals

The second research method used in this study was reflective journaling. Portfolios, or reflective journals, are widely used as a means of professional development, and studies have indicated that they can be used for assessment of professional competence, and for ongoing development (Van der Westhuizen & Smith, 2000). Journals are widely used to document evidence of reflection in fields such as education and nursing. Participants of my study were asked to keep an account of instances of dialogue with their students in the online sessions, which encouraged them to critically reflect on their teaching practice. They had to write in their journals at the end of week one, three, five, and seven of the semester. Those who agreed to participate in this study were briefed about the protocols for maintaining and documenting evidence for reflective journals through an email.

Casanave (2011, p. 5) defined journal writing as a “risk-free, personal, reflective and responsive writing activity done regularly over time in a style that suits the writer’s personality and proficiency level”. Journals also provide writers with personal space to ‘talk’ and ‘listen’

to themselves. Participants in this study were briefed about reflective journals in the following way:

A reflective journal is an account of your work in progress (in your case, what you have taught during a two-week time frame). It should be “a space to wonder, question, think, contradict yourself, agree with yourself, vent, scream, laugh, and celebrate” (Vagle, 2016, p. 174). It is an opportunity for you to ponder over your experience of teaching online, providing critical and analytical engagement with your paper, based on the dialogue that goes on between you and your students. This dialogue may be on discussion forums, blogs, or even over emails you exchange with them. Your reflections should also consider your experience of working with these online technologies.

There is considerable flexibility in how journals can be written--they may be handwritten, word processed, or even done electronically as part of online postings, blogging activities, or web publishing. They can also include drawings, photographs, or other images inserted by hand or digitally (Casanave, 2011). Since my study focused on dialogue in an online environment, participants were advised to make their journals more engaging by documenting evidence of dialogue with their students by taking screen shots of instances that highlighted the depth of dialogue attained (or conversely, not attained) with their students. These were then discussed in detail during the second interview. Since I did not have access to entire threads of dialogue among students and between students and their lecturer, these screenshots helped me to situate how my participants critically reflected on their pedagogical approaches in an online context.

Journals are often used as a tool to encourage reflective writing, where individuals keep track of their learning experience over time (Valli, 1997). Used as a qualitative data collection method, these journals are “useful sources of information on people’s actions and feelings by asking them to give their own interpretation, or account, of what they experience” (Walliman, 2017, p. 113). Maintaining journals provides a written record for two purposes simultaneously: they help in recalling and investigating events over time and also help share one’s own thinking with others (Ussher & Chalmers, 2011). Journaling helps individuals transform their thoughts into written words. This transformation helps develop deeper thought and examination of experiences related to teaching and learning. When shared with others, these journals provide an opportunity to transform internal dialogue into collaborative dialogue (Spiker, 2014). The use of both interviews and reflective journals helped me to triangulate the data, and gain a clearer understanding of what how participants critically reflected on their pedagogy, and how they used this to improve their teaching.

Not all journal writing is reflective in nature. For journal writing to be reflective, it should engage the writer's feelings, emotions, interests, or curiosities. It should also connect the writer with something, such as another idea, another aspect of something, or with other experiences. Additionally, they help the writer develop an awareness of the self, and other events in expanded ways (Casanave, 2011). Bain, Ballantyne, Packer and Mills (1999) analysed a range of journals written by student teachers to categorise writing styles into five levels of sophistication: level 1 writing reported the event (describing, retelling), level 2 writing responded to the event (observing, judging), level 3 writing related the event (connecting) to previous observations and experiences, level 4 writing reasoned the event (reasoned, analysing), and level 5 writing reconstructed the event (generalising, internalising). In order to be categorised as a reflective practitioner, student teachers must learn to write at levels 4 and 5 (Ussher & Chalmers, 2011). Effective reflections cover a wide range of topics, but are typically focused around three main elements. The first of these is emotions, which includes self-awareness, reactions to events, problems faced and emotional release. The second is general teaching issues, which include content and pedagogical knowledge development, schooling and educational aspects such as leadership and parents. The third centres on learning and teaching, and includes self-ability, teacher image and identity, survival, the profession and ideas for improvement (Ussher & Chalmers, 2011).

To ensure that participants critically reflected on their pedagogy while writing in their reflective journals, they were briefed in the following way:

Critical reflection requires that you place your teaching and learning experiences into broader historical, social, and political contexts, and that you think about how to make meaningful, positive, and substantial differences to the lives of your students.

Appendix 3 provides further details on how the participants were guided about how to write in their reflective journals. These guidelines were emailed to those who agreed to participate in the research.

Recruiting Participants

The potential pool of participants included educators who were teaching in an online teaching and learning environment at the tertiary level in New Zealand. I had initially planned to recruit education lecturers from a single university in Auckland that had recently made changes to the

way in which it delivered the Bachelor of Education degree. Previously, this degree was offered in a conventional classroom environment, where the teacher and students would meet for three hours each week according to set time table. In the semester that I collected data (July – November, 2018), this same degree was being offered in a blended learning environment. The programme was structured so that the teachers and students would meet for two hours a week in a classroom, followed by one hour of online tasks to be completed by the students. The next chapter will reveal in detail that there was considerable flexibility in how each educator designed these online tasks. This shift to the online teaching and learning environment also included the use of a discussion forum, on which the students and teachers could post their own comments, and also comment on what had been posted by others.

Once my ethics application was approved (18/223, attached as appendix 4), I reached out to potential participants on the teaching staff (following the procedure I had defined in the Ethics Application) and invited them to participate. The email sent to them, inviting them to participate, was sent by the departmental Secretary on my behalf, a copy of which is attached as appendix 5. Appendix 6 shows a copy of the participant information sheet, which was sent as an attachment with the email. The consent form (appendix 7) that each participant had to sign and send back to me if they agreed to participate was also emailed to the teaching staff.

Recruiting participants proved more challenging than I had expected, and I managed to recruit only two participants, ‘Dianne’ and ‘Molly’. I then got a minor amendment to the inclusion criteria approved by the AUTEK (attached as appendix 8), and then reached out (via email, attached as appendix 9) to potential participants who were teaching online at other tertiary level institutions in the region of Waikato, New Zealand. I managed to recruit one more participant, ‘Henry’, who was teaching a fully online course for the first time during the semester that he was interviewed. This brought my sample size to a total of three participants. Since I have considered each participant as a unique case, I have provided details about each of them in the next chapter.

Data Analysis

By itself, data is meaningless. It needs to be interpreted in order to draw some meaning out of it (Blanken-Webb, 2017). Phenomenologists are known to follow a whole-part-whole process of data analysis. This means reading through the entire data for a sense of the whole, or the

entire description. The researcher then tries to identify parts that stand out as having a similar ‘meaning unit’ (Giorgi, 2009) or a ‘theme’ (van Manen, 2016b). The identification of these meaning units or themes should not be based on any *a priori* beliefs. Rather, these parts should be put together to form a new whole, based on phenomenologically interpreted meanings (Giorgi, 2009; Vagle, 2016).

Van Manen (2016b) describes phenomenological themes as “structures of experience” (p. 79). These themes help arrange our research and writing in order to make sense out of it. Care must be taken not to consider these themes as generalisations; on the contrary, these themes are like “knots in the web of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes” (p. 90). Qualitative research centres on untying these knots, in order to make sense of our experiences.

Although the identification of themes depends on the skills of the researcher, the use of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) has made the task of putting threads together much easier for researchers. NVivo is one such CAQDAS, which helps with tasks such as transcription analysis, coding and text interpretation, writing and annotation, content search and analysis, discourse analysis, and several other types of analysis. The use of CAQDAS has contributed immensely to the rigour and credibility of qualitative data analysis. Research design in education often involves the collection of raw data using interviews, focus groups and observations. Although this data can be analysed manually, the use of CAQDAS helps the researcher to arrive at credible and defensible conclusions (Freitas et al., 2017). I also made use of this software to help me with my data analysis. This not only lent credibility to my findings, but also made the process of data analysis and interpretation much smoother for me.

As a first step of data analysis, I checked the transcripts of each interview against its audio file. I then read and reread each transcript and journal entry as many times as I felt necessary with two intentions in mind: firstly, I sought the uniqueness of the experience of each of my participants, and secondly, I searched for patterns common across them. While doing so, I remained vigilant to tentative manifestations and instances where knowledge ‘took-off’ and came across as surprising for me (Vagle, 2016). Next, I used the software NVivo 11 to organise the raw data from the transcripts and journals into codes (termed ‘nodes’ in NVivo). This again involved a thorough reading of the transcripts and journals and categorising phrases into codes as I read along. Doing so iteratively allowed me to generate themes from my data, each of which has been discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Principles of Ethical Research

Although the research paradigm sets the rules for the researcher, there is still some flexibility and freedom which allows the researcher to take some decisions while doing the research. These decisions reflect the moral position, or, the principles of the researcher. Principles that have guided me throughout my research are well summarised by Newby (2014), and are discussed below:

First and foremost is the respect to honesty in relation to the data I collected. Rather than ignoring data that did not corroborate my findings, I used it to critically understand, in line with hermeneutic phenomenology, how the experience of each participant is unique. Being transparent with my methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation, all transcripts of interviews and copies of journals written by the participants have been submitted to the Post Graduate Office at my university. The fact that all data will be submitted to the Post Graduate Office was intimated all participants via the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 6). Since my supervisor is teaching at the School of Education at AUT and the intention was to recruit as many participants from the same School, a conflict of interest was anticipated. The Participant Information Sheet thus also clarified the steps that were in place to mitigate this possible conflict. In particular, the identity of the participants was not shared with the supervisor. Further, consent forms and data was also not submitted to the supervisor, and instead have been stored at the Post Graduate Office.

The second guiding principle is that of confidentiality. Since this research was done within a hermeneutic phenomenological framework, the experiences of each individual participant were unique to their teaching environment. Although the results will not be entirely generalisable to other universities offering the same mode of learning, this study will provide interesting insights to other universities that intend to start offering online courses. Participant anonymity has been ensured along all steps of the research. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, I stored all signed consent forms at the Post-Graduate office. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, in the office space of the participants, and pseudonyms have been assigned to participants while reporting the findings, which further ensured that participants did not know who the other participants were in this study.

Third, the results of this research were shared with the participants, first by providing them with a transcript of their interviews to ensure that their voices have been interpreted correctly, and secondly by providing them with a summary of the findings. All information provided by the participants will also be acknowledged in any journal articles based on this research. This was done to respect the fact that data collection would not have been possible without their contributions, and that this data was not owned by me, the researcher.

Finally, the participants were presented with all relevant information regarding this research prior to them agreeing to be a part of my study, including how their words captured by the recording instrument were to be used. This was done via the Participant Information Sheet (appendix 6), which was emailed to all potential participants, inviting them to participate in this study. The consent form (appendix 7) gave all participants the right to withdraw from this study at any time, and also to report any misconduct to my supervisor or to Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee. This ensured that the interviewee was well-informed about the consent they were giving, and all vital pieces of information were conveyed to them (Forsey, 2012).

Conclusion

This chapter situated my research within the paradigm of qualitative research, and provided a detailed justification of my choice of research philosophy (post-intentional phenomenology), research methodology (case study), and research methods (interviews and reflective journals). It also provided details of how I recruited participants and interpreted the data that I collected from them. This involved the identification of themes, which have been discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

This research aims to find out how educators critically reflect on their pedagogy in an online teaching and learning environment. Based on Freire's (1993, p. 125) assertion that "human activity consists of action and reflection; it is praxis; it is transformation of the world," it assumes dialogic pedagogy and critical reflection (Dewey, 1933) to be compatible concepts. The concept of dialogic pedagogy is extended to the online teaching and learning environment in an attempt to determine if such an approach can be adopted while teaching online. This research further aims to ascertain if practitioners can critically reflect on their pedagogical approach based on their dialogue with their students. This chapter will report the findings from the data collected by grouping common ideas together to form themes.

This chapter first summarises the individual experience of each participant, though no verbatim quotes are provided to avoid repetition when the themes are later aggregated across participants. In that analysis, I present the elements found to be common across the experience of all three participants. Here, verbatim quotes are used to add authenticity to the findings of this research. Each quote is referenced by first giving the name of the participant, followed by either 1 (indicating that this was said during the first interview), 2 (said during the second interview), or RL (written in the reflective log). For instance, a verbatim referenced as (Molly; 1) would mean that this was said by Molly during her first interview.

All three participants teach at the tertiary level and have recently transitioned from teaching in a conventional, face-to-face environment to an online teaching and learning environment (either in the semester during which they were interviewed, or in the semester prior to it). As has already been discussed, two of them were teaching in a blended learning environment, whereas the third was teaching in a purely online, asynchronous learning environment.

Individual experiences of each participant: A summary

Dianne

At the time of this study, Dianne was teaching on the first year of the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) programme at a university in Auckland, New Zealand. The semester during which she was interviewed was the second semester for her students at the university, which meant they were becoming familiar with the kind of workload expected during a semester.

During her first interview, we discussed the expectations she had for the online part of the paper that she was teaching. Dianne had taught a purely online paper at another university before, so her *a priori* expectations for teaching in a blended learning environment were based on her past experiences of teaching online. At the outset, she was very clear about the need for the online educator to have a presence within the online learning and discussion platform. By presence, she meant that the online educator should respond to comments posted by students on the discussion forum in order to make the students feel that they were being heard. As a result, she expressed her determination to make concerted efforts during the semester to respond to comments made by students in the discussion forum. This required her to allocate a considerable amount of time to going through the threads of discussions, which was not always possible. For Dianne, this felt like extra work which she was not being paid for. In her second interview, she confirmed that as the semester got busier, her interaction with her students in the online space started to decline, since this was the easiest for her to drop off her 'to-do' list.

Dianne also felt that a theoretical base for this shift from a conventional teaching style to a blended learning environment was lacking. The perception, she suggested, among most of the teaching staff at the School of Education was that this transition had not been made because the university felt that this was the right direction to move towards, based on the current trends in higher education. On the contrary, it was perceived by her colleagues as a cost saving exercise. For Dianne, this was demotivating, since this transition required her to invest considerable additional time to train herself in how to use the learning management system (in this case, Blackboard¹) and other social platforms for online interaction with her students

¹ Blackboard is an application for online teaching, learning, community building, and knowledge sharing. More information about this application can be accessed from https://help.blackboard.com/Learn/Instructor/Getting_Started/What_Is_Blackboard_Learn

(Mahara²). In addition to this, she had to spend time to train her students on how to use these platforms as well, which used up precious time during their face-to-face interaction. In her second interview, she mentioned these factors again, where she had to book a session with the technical support staff herself to learn how to use Mahara, and then teach her students how to use it. This meant that students who were not in class on that particular day lost out, and had to seek help from others to learn how to use it. Despite all this effort that she had to make to encourage her students to make use of the online learning environment, interaction between the students and Dianne in the online discussion forum was scarce.

As with any teaching and learning, student engagement with the topic at hand is pivotal. Dianne could see that student engagement with the online part of the course declined over time. She felt this pointed to the students viewing online work as an additional burden, or work that they were not getting any credit (in terms of marks) for. Although, time and again, she emphasised the importance of engaging with the online activities, particularly since they would help the students with their assessments, most students still did not engage with them. The assignments of students who did engage, reflected that they had a deeper understanding of the topic. Although explicitly assigning marks to the online part of the course was one possible way of increasing engagement, Dianne felt that this was not a suitable solution, since they were teaching a degree that taught students to become professionals; having to induce students with marks/grades to do an activity was not an appropriate way of inculcating professional practice among the students.

Dianne also talked about building up the classroom environment through dialogue. For her, building this up was equally important in both online and face-to-face classrooms. Knowing her students well, and their cultural backgrounds, allowed her to reflect on what each individual expressed during class discussions through a constructively critical lens. As a practitioner herself, she felt that knowing the cultural background of her students was crucial in her understanding what they said and why they said it. This not only allowed her to expand her own understanding of the world around her, but also directed her in how to encourage her students to unpack the support material of the paper more deeply. For her, the online platform was like a two-sided coin: on one side, it was unidirectional in terms of dialogue, since it lacked

² Mahara offers features of an ePortfolio (an electronic portfolio—a system in which students can record evidence of lifelong learning, such as essays, artwork, or other artefacts they produce that can be stored digitally) and a social networking system (a place where people interact with friends and create their own online communities) combined. More information about this platform can be accessed from <https://manual.mahara.org/en/1.10/intro/introduction.html>

the promptness that is possible in a face-to-face environment. The obverse was that this same delay allowed students time to keep going back and reflecting on what they read, thereby helping them to unpack it more deeply.

In order to encourage her students to engage in more online discussion, Dianne split each of her classes into groups of eight to ten in the online discussion platform. She mentioned how this was more than the number of students she would previously have in each group, since even if half of them did not engage, there would at least be four to five of them participating. Dianne's experience of smaller groups was that only one or two students would post comments, eventually petering out as the semester progressed, possibly because they felt their words were not being heard. Again, she reiterated the pivotal role her presence on the discussion forums could play in encouraging her students to participate more in the online space. Nonetheless, anticipating that the students were unlikely to interact with each other on the online platform, Dianne was more creative in designing her online activities—she used 'Mahara' and encouraged each of her students to make a page of their own, upload artefacts related to science on it (from their class), and then reflect upon them. Such activities encouraged her students to critically reflect what they were learning, and some of them were even able to draw links between what was taught in her class and what they were learning in other classes.

Overall, in trying to cope with this transition to the blended learning environment, Dianne kept emphasising the need to train herself to use the online space productively, train her students to make use of that space by making them see the value in it, and the consistency required in this training to ensure that students start viewing the online space as the norm. For her, all this boiled down to her presence within the online learning environment.

Henry

Henry was teaching a purely online paper about research methods to management students. This course was taught asynchronously to students at the Masters Level. What made him a suitable candidate for this research was that like the other two participants, he was new to teaching in an online environment—although he had been teaching in a conventional, face-to-face learning environment at the tertiary level for the last twelve years, this was the first time he was teaching an online course. A fully online paper meant that the teaching was interfaced

via Moodle³ (the learning management system being used at his university); all contents of the paper would be uploaded to Moodle, all discussions with the students were to take place via Moodle, and all assessments were to be submitted and graded via Moodle. Since Henry was teaching the same paper face-to-face as well in that same semester, he had decided to record his in-class sessions and then upload them for those students who were taking the net-version of this course.

During his first interview, Henry expressed some very strong assumptions that he had, which were based on his prior experience. He talked about the various avenues of teaching and learning offered through the online space, ranging from personal tutoring (e.g. as popularised by Salman Khan of The Khan Academy⁴) to Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). For him, however, the online space still meant a compromise on the quality of education, since he felt that the relationship between the students and educator was unlikely to develop as it would in a face-to-face class. The relationship between the students and teacher in the conventional learning environment allowed them to engage with each other not only in terms of dialogue, but also in terms of body language, which gave critical feedback to the educator to reflect upon. For him, face-to-face and online teaching were as apart, different, and difficult to reconcile as qualitative and quantitative research methods. He therefore believed that it would be wrong to compare them. During our second meeting, Henry reasserted that as the semester commenced, he could feel a difference in the personalised relationship that he was able to develop with his face-to-face students and his online students; as a result, he was more empathetic towards those studying in the conventional learning environment.

In trying to draw links between critical reflection and dialogue within an online space, Henry again revealed interesting insights. For him, the exchange of dialogue between students and educators was quintessential for educators to be able to critically reflect on their pedagogical approaches. At the same time, he felt that the use of dialogue in class had become a ‘dogma’. He shared his style of being in control of the class first, building up the understanding of his students through that control, and then opening the floor for discussion and dialogue when he felt that all students were at the same level of understanding. For him, allowing the exchange

³ Moodle is a learning platform designed to provide educators, administrators and learners with a single robust, secure and integrated system to create personalised learning environments. More information about this application can be accessed from https://docs.moodle.org/36/en/About_Moodle

⁴ Khan Academy is a non-profit educational organisation created in 2008 by Salman Khan with the goal of creating a set of online tools that help educate students. The organisation produces short lessons in the form of YouTube videos. More information about this website can be accessed from <https://www.khanacademy.org/about>.

of dialogue before bringing all students to the same level of understanding would be a waste of time, where the students would just be reinventing the wheel. On the other hand, the exchange of dialogue that took place thereafter was always brilliant, reflecting how well the students had understood the concept being discussed.

Henry anticipated that his dialogue with his online students would not be as rich as it is in a conventional classroom, and this would restrain the dimensions along which he could critically reflect on his teaching practice. He therefore planned to fill this void by recording his in-class lectures to be uploaded for his online students. For Henry, this was an invaluable way of becoming a critically reflective practitioner, and he compared it to how researchers, once having written an article, go back and re-read it after a few days to find errors in their own work. Similarly, Henry felt that watching the recorded videos allowed him to consider ways of improving his pedagogical approach. He became more aware about each and every word he said in class, how he said it, and also how well planned his classes had become ever since he started recording them. The downside to this was the adjustments he had to make in this natural teaching style—Henry was used to moving around the class while teaching, and made use of a lot of body gestures. Since he knew his lectures were being recorded, he had to restrict himself to stay within one space, and also use the whiteboard sparingly, since he knew the online students would find it difficult to read what was written there.

Overall, Henry felt that students who take online courses do not get the same value from it as do students who are studying in a face-to-face environment. Even though the online space offers them with a discussion forum to discuss their views and comment on each other's understandings and opinions, these platforms are not used to their fullest potential—his experience shows that students shy away from it, and the majority would not interact unless their interaction would be graded. Since there is no interaction between the students and the teachers in the real world, it becomes challenging for practitioners to reflect on the latent and unobservable characteristics of their students. Nonetheless, he was of the strong opinion that that was where the future of the 'university' was heading, and educators who did not prepare themselves for it would soon find themselves jobless.

Molly

Molly was also teaching the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) programme at a university in Auckland. Although she was teaching students enrolled in all three years of that degree, I was more interested in finding about her experiences of teaching those enrolled in the first and third year of the programme. As with all other participants, I was interested in Molly's experiences in transitioning into the blended learning environment, and how she critically reflected on her practice in a learning environment she was still adjusting to. Since she was teaching a Mathematics paper to both year 1 and year 3 students she provided interesting insights into the contrast of dialogue that she was able to develop with these two cohorts in the online space.

For Molly, this shift from a face-to-face learning environment to the blended learning environment was more than just a pedagogical shift—training herself to be able to use the technology associated with it required a frustratingly large amount of time and effort. She reflected upon whether the effort she was putting in was worth it, since she knew her students were not engaging as much with the online component of the course as she would have liked them to do so. Pedagogically, this shift required her to be very mindful of the online tasks that she had to design, in order to ensure that they were closely aligned to what was going on in class. For her, this was also important so that students could see the benefits of engaging with the online work; if they did not see the benefit, they would not engage. During her second interview, Molly talked about how most of the students were very explicit in expressing that if there was no grade attached to the online work, they would simply not do it. Therefore, even though she reminded her students often to engage with the online tasks, very few of them actually did so. Also, as the semester progressed, the number of students engaging declined.

Molly also talked about the contrast in the dialogue that developed between those studying in Year 3 and those studying in Year 1 of this programme. Students enrolled in Year 1 did comment more, but their responses were more superficial in nature, ranging from 'Good job!' to 'I like what you have said'. In assignments requiring students to provide feedback to each other's comments, not one of them did so. In contrast, those enrolled in Year 3 interacted less, but their comments showed that they had developed their own beliefs about teaching mathematics, and could support what they believed and why they believed it. For Molly, this made her more aware of encouraging her Year 1 students to understand what it is to professionally critique some one's work, and also how to receive critique in a positive way. She also connected this to the relationships that had developed over time among her Year 3 students.

Since the Year 1 students had only recently begun their degree, these relationships were still in the formative phase for them, and Molly wondered if this was why they shied away from providing feedback on the work of other students. Molly further connected this reticence to the lack of anonymity in the online space, and whether this platform was safe for students. Since all comments appeared with the names of the students, she felt that the students might have been reluctant to comment on each other's work. She wondered whether students would have participated more if there was anonymity in the discussion forums. Molly also linked this to how comments may be interpreted differently by those reading them—face-to-face discussions allow those who are a part of it to read the body language of the participants, and also allow the speaker to vary their tone of voice in order to clarify what they mean. Written comments are open to be interpreted differently by different readers. This was also evident in how some of her students interpreted the assignment questions differently from what Molly had meant, and during our interview, she discussed how these interpretations widened her perspectives about philosophical underpinnings around teaching mathematics.

For Molly, the online platform offered students enrolled at this university an opportunity to get exposure to a platform they might not necessarily have engaged with before. While the platform offers numerous benefits to students, she questioned its accessibility for two reasons. One, she knew some of the students either did not have Internet access at home or did not have computers at home, thus requiring them to go to other places to be able to complete their online tasks. Although she was aware of the support that the university provides for such students, she was equally aware of the social stigmas attached to students reaching out for such support. As a result, not all students requiring such support opted for it. Second, she talked about the learning management system as not being compatible on mobile phone devices and offering limited features and flexibility compared to those offered when the learning management system was used on a computer. This limited the students to not being able to access their online tasks when on the bus, since Molly felt they were less likely to pull out their laptop while on the bus whereas they would probably have done it on their phones. This issue of limited accessibility also turned up when one of the online tasks required students to upload videos of themselves talking about the topic being discussed, but some students informed her in their face-to-face class that they did not know how to upload videos. Molly talked about her needing to be more considerate when designing these online activities for future iterations of this course, and to try and ensure equitable access of resources.

Another consideration for Molly was being honest about the reasons behind this transition from a face-to-face to a blended learning environment. While acknowledging the benefits that this additional space can provide to students where they can communicate, interact, and learn from each other, Molly felt that the real reason behind it was to solve staffing issues for the university and workload issues for the existing lecturers. Molly was aware that the Head of the School of Education also realised that the staff was over-burdened with the existing workload, and therefore the partial shift to the online platform was regarded as a possible solution to address the workload issue. Whereas previously the lecturing staff were to meet their students for three hours a week for every course, now they only had to meet for two hours, and then post an hour's work to the online platform. Molly also wondered whether the quality of the degree would be affected, since the management had reduced the number of face-to-face contact hours between the students and the teachers. She felt that even if it was not worse than what the students were getting last year, it had the potential to be better if the online platform was used as a space to connect across different papers. In order to use the online space to its maximum potential, Molly felt that the motivation had to come from the teaching staff themselves, which in turn depended on the importance placed on this transition by the Head of the School of Education.

Common experiences (Themes)

Having discussed each participant individually, it is evident that all three participants were not able to engage their students in dialogue as much as they would have liked to. In what follows, I present the common themes identified across their experiences. In order to do so, I will first discuss the importance of dialogue in the teaching environment (both face-to-face and online) for each of these participants. Next, I will articulate why, in retrospect, the educators felt that dialogue was not as free-flowing as they would have wanted to be in the online discussion forums, and how they critically reflected on the absence (rather than presence) of dialogue.

A critically reflective pedagogical approach

Both Dianne and Molly had initially qualified as teachers. Their responses indicated that they both were well informed about what it means to be a critically reflective practitioner. Molly

talked about thinking ‘deeply about her practice on a daily basis’ (Molly; 1). She also talked about how this allowed her

to be able to look at situations or circumstances and be able to consider other people’s points of view, to be able to consider the outcomes that arrived from that situation, and analyse what might have led to that position, to consider what other actions may have been more beneficial to either change the outcome or provide opportunities for greater understandings for students...I think critical reflection is very important for considering things such as who’s speaking in the room, who’s not, why might that be the case, does everyone have access to resources, if not then who and why, how I might support them in that...(Molly; 1)

Dianne and Molly’s responses also suggested that they were familiar with the literature that supported critical reflection. For instance Dianne talked about the difference in being “reflexive” and “reflective” and also how everything they had experienced in their initial teacher education and in their vast experience in school after that, added to their “keté⁵ of pedagogies and philosophical underpinnings” (Dianne; 1).

There’d be a couple of aspects on it, and I guess in a university setting, that it’s critical according to what, as in what literature are you basing it on? Are you critical as in unpacking your learning? I guess it also comes down to being reflexive and well as reflective, and looking deeper into the environment to sort of where they’re going. (Dianne; 1)

I’m a fan of Paulo Freire myself, and so I very much consider his work and ask philosophical questions about my own practice quite regularly, and it is a skill that has to be developed over time. To question...what is the knowledge being shared here, who is holding that knowledge, how can that come out...(Molly; 1)

On the other hand, although Henry did not talk about the literature that supported critically reflecting about one’s practice, he gave subtle hints about how he critically reflected on his own pedagogical practices by considering teacher appraisals and student feedback from both mid-semester and at the end of each term.

So this means that I do take into account reflective activities in the sense that I do change things while the course is in progress, by taking into consideration that something is not right, so in that way you can say it is reflective, because I don’t freeze...I’m open to criticism, I’ve moulded my mind to be able to take criticism in a positive way. I don’t feel offended (Henry; 1)

⁵A Maori word meaning ‘basket’ or ‘kit’. More details can be accessed from <https://maoridictionary.co.nz/search?idiom=&phrase=&proverb=&loan=&histLoanWords=&keywords=kete%27>

He also talked about how this transition towards teaching an online course had made him more self-aware and cautious of the way he taught. This was because recording his in-class lectures and uploading them for his online students meant that “everything is now documented” (Henry; 1).

For me it helped, it improved my pedagogy. It definitely improved my pedagogy because I know how everything is documented. I’m more aware of what I do. I’ll think about one hundred times before I say something in class if I’m not sure about that information. (Henry; 1)

Common across all three participants was the importance of knowing the social and cultural background of their students in order to correctly interpret what they said and why they said it. Although this knowledge was easier to decipher in a face-to-face class and in the blended learning environment, Henry also talked about how he did have knowledge about his online students, where they were residing, whether they were employed or stay-at-home parents, and so on. From her previous experience of teaching a purely online course, Dianne also recalled how she would invite her students to share more about themselves during the first week.

Having this knowledge of their students helped all the participants to critically reflect on the literature that they had read about teaching practice, and also question their own *a priori* assumptions and pedagogical practices. For instance, Dianne talked about a Māori student in her class who felt that there was no tension between the Western ways of teaching science and traditional ways, but she had had students in the past who felt that there was a tension and they found it hard to crossover to Western science. In situations like this, Dianne felt that being a critically reflective practitioner allowed her to “be open to others’ perspectives, and create a safe enough environment, whether it’s online or offline to actually explore these different viewpoints” (Dianne; 1). Molly also talked about a student who was unable to come to class, and how contacting him to discuss his irregular attendance helped her to understand his situation and then support him so that he could engage in the tasks and learning required for the assessments.

Whereas the previous two examples revealed the significance of teachers’ knowing the cultural background of their students, helping the practitioners to better understand their students, Henry related to this in an interesting way. He recalled how he used to have a soft spot for his Pasifika students because they respected him more, compared to students of European decent. Over time, he realised that this was unfair, since these cultural differences should not make him favour some students over the other.

Previously I used to have a soft corner (sic) for Pasifika students, but now I think I know everyone is different, so this is his way of relating to environment, and this is his way of relating to environment [referring to Kiwi students of European decent] and me as the faculty, you know, I am in the middle—I am a bridge between both of them—so I shouldn't be very happy that someone is like respecting me for no reason and I shouldn't be offended or insulted if someone isn't... (Henry; 2)

Dianne also reported an instance where she gave reminders to her students of completing their assignments closer to the deadlines—she knew that her Pasifika students had other family responsibilities and would delay their assignments. Although she reflected over her reminder as being too heavy handed, one of her student's actually thanked her later for being so concerned about her students.

I was keeping an eye on the assignments coming in from some of my Pasifika students who have a lot of family responsibilities and tend to get assignments in late. I reminded them to get their assignment in, and spelt out the consequences. I was concerned I was too heavy handed, but she thanked me.

“Yes sadly that is the consequence for my lack of time management. But I hope to learn my lesson because as you stated, I know I am ‘capable’.”(Dianne; RL; the last line is an excerpt from the student's email)

Overall, all participants recognised critical reflection as playing an essential role in their personal growth and development as a lecturer. Examining whether this critical reflection was based on their dialogue with their students in the online environment, or was based on other factors, is the central premise of this research. In light of what follows, this theme will be critically analysed in the next chapter.

Dialogue

All participants noted that it was indispensable for them to engage in dialogue with their students, whether it was in a face-to-face classroom environment or in the online learning space. For instance, during her first interview, Dianne said:

Normally, in a face-to-face classroom, you spend time building the classroom environment, and it's equally important to build the online classroom environment....

Molly shared the same belief, but took it one step further, by asserting that

it [dialogue] is very much critical, and it's not just dialogue as in talking, it's also dialogue as in listening, and also observing.

Henry grounded his rationale for recording his class sessions and uploading them for his online students by acknowledging the usefulness of dialogue while teaching in a conventional classroom environment, and how it allows for the discussion to slowly build up.

That is one reason why I think recording a face-to-face lecture and putting it up for the online version is useful, because you know when you're building up a discussion...slowly, slowly, slowly by continuous interaction with the students and then you know they reach a level of understanding—so this is called counterfactuals—I know that if the online students were substituted with these same students, they would have the same level of understanding.

He had a slightly different opinion when it came to dialogue with his students. During the first interview, he said that engaging in dialogue with students had “become a dogma rather than a knowledge that discussion is good”. His style of teaching was to be in control of the class at first, so that he could build up the understanding of his students. Once he felt that all students had reached that average level of understanding, he would then like to open up the floor to discussion. The exchange of dialogue that took place after that would be “Excellent, absolutely fine!” (Henry; 1).

The participants identified numerous advantages of engaging in dialogue with their students:

So you're always assessing their knowledge a lot of time through conversations one on one. (Dianne; 1)

Once they start talking, they get some positive feedback, and that's of value. (Dianne; 1)

Sometimes it's just pointing out a different opinion, sometimes it's breaking barriers...so it's positioning yourself as a learner alongside them, and that can occur both online and in the classroom. (Dianne; 1)

Dialogue is critical for building relationships...interesting, positive relationships between students and teachers. (Molly; 1)

So we do talk about the fact that there are lots of different ways of approaching education, and I may or may not agree with you, but that's fine because that's the point...my job is to open the doors so that they can explore it and experience it, and then make the choice for themselves, because they need to be their teacher. I'm not making models of me. (Molly; 1)

The participants also talked about the online discussion forums offering opportunities that were different from those in-class:

‘...because they’re different mediums. They do give you a chance to get different perspectives. Yes, it’s more fleeting in the classroom, but you’re able to respond to the moment, which you lose in the online work...and then in the online work, you actually have it there and it’s captured so you can go back to it and you can manipulate it’ (Dianne; 1)

Online is all documented, I can check them even at the end of the term, during the teaching recess. (Henry; 1)

If you think of it, you know, online provides opportunity to give space to people, and that might be good for some people in some circumstances...but in other circumstances, that’s not necessarily a positive thing. (Molly; 1)

Based on these differences, and especially since transitioning to the online learning environment was a new experience for all three participants, they all talked about the extra effort required on their part to be able to engage effectively with their students. These are discussed in more detail in the sections that follow.

Adding a ‘Human Element’ to the online learning environment

During their first interview, all participants talked about their intention to add a ‘human element’ to the online part of their courses. By this, they meant that they believed it would be useful for their students if they could make short videos of themselves of either giving feedback to their students or encouraging them for the online work they are doing, and upload them on their learning management system. When asked to share why they planned to do so, they deliberated over the online platform as being ‘flat’ and ‘one dimensional’, and having the potential for many misunderstandings to develop, since ‘you don’t get the body language’ (Dianne; 1). Dianne backed this by referring to some conference presentations that she had attended during the semester break before she was interviewed, which had talked about online educators doing some sort of filming to give a face-to-face context to online courses, even if they are asynchronous. For Henry, the human element was the reason for him uploading his in-class lectures for his online students. During her second interview, Molly also talked about the potential for there to be some misunderstandings on the online discussion forums:

The online context does not have tone of voice, it does not have body language, and so things can be misconstrued if they don’t have a relationship. And I think that relationship very much supports a positive experience. (Molly; 2)

As evident from the quote above, participants linked the need for a human element to the relationships that they were able to develop with their students in the conventional, face-to-

face classrooms, but not in the online classes. Henry was very explicit about this, and went so far as to say that the online students were compromising on the quality of what they were learning by opting to learn remotely. He was able to develop a closer relationship with his in-class students, and he felt that the students felt the same way. He talked about how his in-class students would request him to recheck their assignments if they felt they were given a grade lower than what they deserved—his online students had not asked him of any such favours as yet, and he believed they wouldn't do so in the future either, since such a relationship had not been established between them.

Interaction is very important, so I have this connection with the students in the face-to-face classes. But with the online students, I don't have any connections with them. So I am a bit less concerned about the net students. For the face-to-face students, I may listen to their requests. But for the net students, I may not, because, first of all, I haven't seen them and don't know them too well, but secondly, they also would not ask for anything from me since there is this detachment. (Henry; 2)

He also talked about all communication between him and his students centring on technical issues they had in accessing course material that he had uploaded for them; there was no communication between them where they debated or critically analysed the content of what had been uploaded. Similarly, when Molly was asked the feature that most distinguished the online classes from the face-to-face ones, she replied 'relationships', which she felt was there between the educator and the students in the face-to-face classes, but not there in the online classes (Molly; 2). This was particularly interesting because Molly was teaching in a blended learning environment, and had developed relationships with her students in the face-to-face sessions, but this aspect was still missing from the online component of the course.

This is not to say that the participants were not attempting to develop these relationships in the online part of the course. Both Dianne and Molly also made efforts to respond to their students comments online. For instance, during her first interview, Dianne said:

I'll just wander in and say 'Oh Hi! I've seen six people have gone in and I've seen some great ideas, and I particularly like this and this', so I will wander in asynchronously to make comments on what's going on, because I think its fair...(Dianne; 1)

The participants also wrote about this in their reflective logs:

I am making a real effort to follow up the online work in class. It has to be seen to be important. My prioritising of something indicates its importance. (Dianne; RL)

Comments that I as a lecturer did make were formative in nature. Often asking questions to further extend student thinking, or provoke them to make connections with other areas of content we have discussed in class. (Molly; RL)

Henry opted to communicate with his students via email, and responded quickly to their queries. He did not respond to the comments his students posted in the online discussion forum. He also reported that only one of his students' was regular in posting on the discussion forum, and the others would post intermittently. For him, what mattered to the students was not the presence of the teacher, but grades—if he had assigned a grade to the discussion forum, most students would have posted regularly, but since he had not, the students were less inclined to contribute.

Design of the online task

Another aspect that the participants deliberated over was how the online learning environment was inherently different from the face-to-face learning environment. Henry gave the analogy of trying to compare quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis—although the purpose behind both is to try and reveal what is previously unknown, the two methods cannot be compared. Similarly, although the end is to enhance learning, the way in which it happens is different in a face-to-face environment than an online learning environment. Comparing them, therefore, would not be fair.

Face-to-face and online is different—there is intrinsic differences between these two, and you can't really compare them. What works for face-to-face will not for online. There will be some averaging but in Net, I have to make lots of assumptions, that you know they will understand this, or they will have the maturity to understand this. So basically in face-to-face, I would take a continuous approach towards their understanding but for online it is discrete—I will take one step, and then I'll go to another step so it is like step, step, step, step... (Henry; 1).

...the relationship online is different, because it has to be...for [a] different reason. If you think of it, you know, the online provides [an] opportunity to give space to people, and that might be good for some people in some circumstances—it gives an opportunity for distances, but in other cases, that's not necessarily a positive thing. (Molly; 1)

Recognising these inherent differences, all participants also talked about anticipating them beforehand and therefore, designing the online activities and assessments accordingly.

That is the reason why for the same paper, you see for face-to-face and Net, one has to very cleverly develop the papers distinctively you know—there would be some distinctions. And some distinctions will come through assumptions, that Net students will do this. (Henry; 1)

To do blended learning really well, it's often that you need to have some really short, sharp, fit for purpose type activities that work really well, and I guess the amount of planning to put something like that online, it creates a greater demand than actually preparing face-to-face. (Dianne; 1)

I still want the learning to be really relevant, and I'm really mindful of what I'm designing or considering tasks for the online learning environment, that it is very much not a repeat of what's done in class, it's not a replacement of lectures, but its an additional support. (Molly; 1)

Most tasks were crafted in a way that they could scaffold students towards achieving the assignments, or as an extension of that week's session. (Molly; RL)

The participants also talked about how students appreciated that the online tasks were helpful for them in their assignments.

One of the students told me that the online work was better this semester because it was more relevant and seemed more useful in that it was linked to the assignment. (Dianne; RL)

One student called me actually, she is in Wellington. She told me she really liked my videos, in the sense that she really enjoyed the way I taught. (Henry; 2)

The participants, however, were not pleased with the time and effort required to design these activities. The school within the university where Dianne and Molly taught had recently transitioned from teaching their papers from fully face-to-face to a blended mode of teaching and learning—both participants expressed their dissatisfaction for the rationale behind this transition. They both felt that this move had been made not because this was the way forward for the university, but simply to solve staffing and workload issues. Despite this, the staff actually had to spend more time than usual to get acquainted with the technology. Molly also expressed this in her reflective log, where she discussed that with technology changing so rapidly, she was not sure how valuable it was for her to spend time in getting used to the technology being used now—it would soon be outdated and she would have to start afresh with learning the new technology. Although she gave credit to the online platform as being an important space where students could be in charge of their learning, she believed that the rationale for having this space needed to be clarified first.

Absence/Presence of dialogue

During the second interview, and in the reflective logs, the participants talked about the interaction with their students in the online platform diminishing as the semester progressed.

As the semester went on, and the pressure of assignments grew, less students commented. I did suggest that to help with assignment two they should go back and add in work. (Dianne; RL)

Not really satisfied. They are not using it much. One [of the online students] is very very keen...but the rest are commenting [only] very randomly. (Henry; 2)

When asked to critically reflect over why this may be so, they gave several reasons. Firstly, the participants felt that they themselves had to give a high priority to the online part of the course so that their students modelled this behaviour and took the online part of the course more seriously. This was particularly true for those teaching in a blended learning environment. Having had some experience teaching a fully online course, Dianne could anticipate this since the beginning of the semester; during the first interview as well, she kept emphasising that she had to come up with ways to convince the students that engaging with the online work was important.

Well they're engaged to an extent. I mean they definitely haven't engaged as much as I would have liked in the discussion groups, but that's just how it is, and its about trying to think what works and engage them more. (Dianne; 2)

Henry also reported that his students also did not engage in discussion on the online platform. As already mentioned, Henry did not interact with his students in the online discussion forum. During his first interview, he did say that he was 'not a fan of immediate answers' (Henry; 1); also, since all the online discussions were documented, he could revisit them at a later point in time to see what the students had been discussing. He felt that his students would not have made more use of the online discussion platform even if he had also shared that space with them. On the contrary, he felt that if he had assigned a grade for them to comment a certain number of times, then his students would have engaged with each other more.

So even if I had responded, my view is that they still wouldn't have contributed more to discussions. Anything which is optional, they won't do it. (Henry; 2)

Molly and Dianne shared a similar point of view. Thinking back about possible reasons for their students not interacting as much as they would have liked to, they talked about how they felt the engagement might have been more if the online component had a grade attached to it.

I think having marks allotted to my online work would heighten the value of it. (Dianne; RL)

And they said that honestly, if there was a grade attached to it, we'd do it, but we're busy people and we don't see it as a priority. Even though the online component has been designed to be linked to the assignments, so if they'd completed these online tasks, it would have helped them to be successful with their assignments. But they didn't see it as necessarily useful. (Molly; 2)

I have discussed the lack of engagement with students over the term and a motivator for students is that they want responses from the lecturer, and more importantly students commented that they would be more apt to participate if they were getting a grade for it. (Molly; RL)

Another aspect that Dianne talked about was having consistency in the online discussion forum. By this, she meant that she had to train both herself and her students in regularly visiting the online discussion forum and posting or replying to comments there.

It's consistency, it's having confidence, it's thinking that yes, some of them are engaging but it's better to be dialogic and perhaps there would be more engagement if there was back and forth going...but that involves being regular. (Dianne; 2)

Similarly, Molly also talked about how she would sporadically reply to comments posted by her students on the discussion forum. She did recall that those students whom she responded to would definitely post again in the following week (Molly; 2). This not only points to the importance of the presence of the educator in the online discussion forum, but also how participating regularly can encourage students to engage in more dialogue.

Critically reflecting over this absence of dialogue, Molly felt that this pointed to her students not knowing how to professionally critique their colleagues, and also how to accept critique.

Is it needed that students are supported in understanding how to give a critical evaluation/feedback and how to receive this in a professional manner? Does this link to their understanding of what good professional practice is about (and that this is not personal)? (Molly; RL)

This was really interesting for me because then I got thinking about the fact that do they know how to critique each other's work in a professional manner? Do they have those skills? So that would be something that in the future I would consider about developing having

discussions around—professional critique as opposed to negative criticism, how that's different, and that it's a good thing to ask questions, and not a bad thing. (Molly; 2)

Another aspect crucial to dialogue was the cultural background of students. It was interesting to see that the online space offered opportunities to those who would otherwise be shy in a face-to-face environment. Similarly, it allowed opportunities to those who were committed elsewhere but nonetheless, wanted to progress in their careers.

I did have one student in particular in last semester who found it very challenging, for a variety of reasons, to come to class; and so he specifically did talk to me about the online learning opportunities because that's what he could engage in, he couldn't actually come in to the class and do it face to face, so for him that was quite useful. (Molly; 1)

Conversely, cultural differences created a disadvantage in terms of equity—not all students had the resources required to access the online part of the course. Dianne and Molly also talked about inequality visible in the two campuses of their university where the Bachelors of Education programme was offered—one campus was located in a socio-economically affluent area of Auckland, whereas the other was located in a relatively disadvantaged area. As a result, the students also did not have equal access to resources. Both Dianne and Molly acknowledged the support offered by the university to students who did not have access to these resources, but at the same time, they knew that students were shy to seek help as there were social stigmas attached to doing so.

It is also to be aware of the inequity of the Māori/Pasifika students who are on [one of the] campus compared to those [who are on the other] campus and that they may feel too embarrassed to seek help. (Dianne; RL)

Henry talked about cultural differences from the point of view of the educator. Being an Asian himself, he felt he was culturally distanced from his students.

Also, because of cultural differences, I really can't mix with these undergraduate students. Their mind is totally different, like they won't come to a class if it is a Friday afternoon, and I can't relate to this. On the other hand, [students enrolled in the] Masters [programme] are more culturally diverse, there are more Asian students in Masters and they're more hardworking and I can relate to them culturally. So that is important for me. Not being able to relate culturally is difficult for me.

Therefore, the kind of relationship that developed between the educator and the students depended on the cultural background of the students, and this in turn had an impact on the dialogue that developed between them.

Year of study

All participants also talked about the level at which their students were enrolled, and related this to not only how frequently they posted comments, but also the quality of what they posted.

What is interesting is that the older students, especially those from who have worked before are more likely to engage. One of my students who is in a different class with predominantly older students who started this semester were amazed at the different attitude to their work. He thought it had to do with not being straight out of school and taking more responsibility for their learning rather than being spoon fed, like at school. This was in relation to the online/preparation at home work. (Dianne; RL)

And I can say that net students were slightly, perhaps slightly better than the face-to-face students. This is because the net students were mature. By default, they were working or engaged somewhere. The in-class students are still not very mature. So I think the net students might be slightly better. (Henry; 2)

In both the comments above, participants have noted that mature-age students with life experience were more responsible in completing their online tasks. Henry also talked about his online students commenting less but what they said had more meaning; they were not “beating around the bush” (Henry; 2). On the other hand, his in-class students would talk more but would often engage in dialogue that was not as meaningful. As reported earlier, Molly also talked about her students in year 1 giving more “surfaced” feedback to their class fellows, whereas those in year 3 would give more constructive feedback. She attributed the following as the most probable reason for this:

They’ve [year 3’s] established more professional kind of relationships with their peers at different levels, but the year 1’s haven’t had that opportunity; they haven’t had as much time together. (Molly; 2)

Henry also talked about the absence of these relationships among his online students. Since they were all located remotely, they did not have the chance to get acquainted to each other outside the online space. For him, this was one possible reason for the low level of interaction between them.

If they could have done some group study before their assignment that could have helped them a lot. But they don’t have that chance. (Henry; 2)

Molly also related the frequency of interaction to the recent transition of the School of Education at the university she was teaching at to a blended mode of learning. She contemplated that this form of interaction was ‘normal’ for students in year 1. On the other hand, students in year 3 thought of this as additional work, since they did not have to engage with any online work in the first two years that they had spent in this programme. As a result, students in year 1 engaged more regularly compared to those in year 3.

In comparing the two year levels, I wonder if there is any connection between engagement in the online learning space and how “normal” it is to have this experience. This is in part informed by the lack of visible engagement with the year 3 in comparison to the year 1’s and that the online context is new to both groups as it has only formally begun this year. (Molly; RL)

Dianne also talked about her students considering the online part of the course as additional work:

...but I think the perception for the students is, who are new to this, that its additional work that they’re not getting any credit for. (Dianne; 1)

As a result, Molly talked about the leadership team in her school to establish the importance of blended learning during these initial, formative years. If they did, then students enrolling in this degree would take it as being a part of their course; if they did not, then students would view this as additional work and not engage as much in it and thus, compromise on the quality of their degree.

I think we have to really closely look at what are our genuine reasons as to why we’re doing this, does it fit our pedagogical understanding of how students learn, or are we just ticking a box? Because that underpinning justification will feed the success or failure of a blended learning environment. And then you have to give the time and energy that it demands, or otherwise you’re just adding window dressing and then it doesn’t have any deep meaning or learning opportunities for students...Once it becomes a part of the norm, I’m making an assumption but I can see it could be more fluid, or ‘normal’...

Alternative to Dialogue

Teaching in a blended learning environment allowed the educators to take advantage of the best of both modes of education; face-to-face and online. With regards to dialogue, both Dianne and Molly talked about aspects offered by both: although dialogue in the face-to-face sessions

was fleeting, they allowed those present in the classroom to respond to the moment. On the other hand, although dialogue in the online platform was delayed, it allowed students time to pull threads together, keep deliberating over what they were learning to refine their thoughts and ideas, and then respond appropriately when they thought they were ready.

During this research, an interesting finding that came forward was that in papers making use of a blended learning environment, the online educators were more creative in how to use the online space. Since the face-to-face classes allowed them to engage in the dialogic process with their students, their use of the online space was not limited to just posting comments and responding to each other on the discussion forum. Dianne, for instance, asked her students to make their own profile on Mahara—once each student had made their profile, she asked them to upload artefacts related to what they were learning throughout the course; this could be in the form of their observations or critical reflections of what is going on in class, mini-lessons they had to plan, or even short videos or pictures from their teaching practicum. She talked about the reason for making use of the Mahara online platform in her reflective log:

The reason it was important to have this activity for online work was that students needed to be able to upload their work to an online repository when after they had completed their work in class. By uploading their observations electronically, they could keep it safe and then draw on the information to write their assignment. (Dianne; RL)

A screenshot of a Mahara profile created by one of her students is given as Figure 8 (page 109). Dianne felt that the quality of evidence that her students uploaded varied. Using Mahara for the online component of her paper made it less dialogic, but it allowed her to hold her students accountable for what they wrote in their assignments, because she could revisit her student's profile while marking their assignments to see where they were drawing the information that they were writing about. Dianne felt that just like dialogue allows those involved to critically reflect on what they are talking about, such an activity could potentially serve the same purpose:

So its training the students I suppose to put a 'post-it' note, an online 'post-it' note of their thinking in that certain area, and its also making them think deeply about what they're reading and what they're seeing, because too often we're too superficial and we're not actually reflexive, and we're probably not even reflective. (Dianne; 2)

Similarly, Molly talked about making videos of herself and uploading them online for her students.

So in my third year paper...I did put posts of myself having discussions and demonstrations of different philosophical ideas, and I posted it up

online. And students' feedback in that was 'Oh that was really helpful to be able to go back and just kind of review that', because these are not little concepts, they are quite complex in many ways (Molly; 2)

Despite taking such an initiative herself, she reported a task where her students had to make a video of themselves and upload it; not a single student participated in that online task. Again, the absence of dialogue made her critically analyse this:

I had some people who commented that well actually, I don't know how to use those resources and how to actually participate, so I don't know how to upload a video. And that was something I had not considered, and thought that's true, I've limited your ability to contribute because you didn't know how to use the resource. So that's something I need to consider in the future in terms of how do you have equitable access for different people's skill level? (Molly; 2)

As mentioned earlier, Henry tried to bridge the gap between his online students and his face-to-face students by uploading videos of his class lectures. Since he could anticipate that students would not engage in dialogue if it was not necessary for them to do so, the alternate for this was to provide his online students with the next best option that was possible.

Conclusion

This chapter began by summarising the experience of each participant individually, highlighting the pedagogical shifts they had to make as they transitioned towards teaching in an online teaching and learning environment, and how their dialogue with their students allowed them to critically reflect on their pedagogical approach. These experiences were then aggregated and presented as themes common across the three participants. Overall, the data gathered revealed that the practitioners considered dialogue to be indispensable for them to be able to foster relationships with their students; these relationships allowed them to critically reflect on their pedagogical tools. In the online teaching and learning environment, there was insufficient dialogue, which made the practitioners seek alternative ways of engaging their students. The next chapter will discuss these themes in light of the existing literature.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings detailed in the previous chapter. As already described in Chapter Three, I will be analysing my data through a post-intentional phenomenological lens. While doing so, I followed the five-step process outlined by Vagle (2016). These steps have already been discussed in detail in Chapter Three, so I will only briefly revisit them here in relation to my study. The phenomenon of interest identified by me (step one) was the dialogical relation between students and teachers in an online teaching and learning environment. More precisely, I wanted to explore whether online educators could critically reflect on their pedagogy based on their dialogue with their students. In order to do so, phenomenological material was gathered (step two) from three educators, all of who were teaching in an online environment. This data was gathered via two semi-structured interviews from each participant, and through the reflective journal that each participant was asked to maintain on a fortnightly basis. The third step involved making a post-reflexion plan. The interviews I had with each participant were almost two months apart. During this time, I listened to the recorded interview, and then read and re-read each transcript numerous times. Each time I did so, I would record my thoughts and interpretations about what the participant said in my own journal. I would also relate these to my own experiences of teaching in a blended learning environment to see how the experiences of my participants added to my knowledge about this phenomenon. This chapter will encompass step four and five, whereby I will post-intentionally discuss and interpret the data gathered in light of the existing literature, theory, and my own reflections and experiences.

Since my research is about the experiences of educators while teaching in an online teaching and learning environment, it is worthwhile to reiterate here my own experience of teaching at the undergraduate level over a span of approximately ten years—while I mostly taught in a conventional, face-to-face environment, the last two years of my teaching experience were as a local tutor for a distance learning programme at a university in Pakistan. Students enrolled in this programme had synchronous, online classes with their tutor in the United Kingdom once a week, and two hours of face-to-face classes with their local tutor. Both the local tutor and the international tutor had to work together, and the local tutor was responsible for making sure

that the students had engaged with the course material for each week before they had their online sessions. Grappling with the issues in developing effective and continuous dialogue in the distance learning environment fuelled my interest for this research topic. While the previous chapter broke the ‘whole’ down into ‘parts’, I will try to make a new, more meaningful, and connected ‘whole’ out of the parts in this chapter (Vagle, 2016), through a post-intentional phenomenological lens.

Revisiting Post-Intentional Phenomenology

Having had experience in teaching at the undergraduate level, in both kinds of learning environments, I had some pre-conceived expectations about the experiences of online educators. As I began exploring these in greater detail within the existing literature, some of my expectations were reinforced, while others were challenged. Moving further along with this project, the interviews with the participants further strengthened some of my beliefs, and made me question others. Therefore, I chose to follow the concept of bridling (referred to in Chapter Three), first introduced by Dahlberg (2008), and later built upon by Vagle (2016). This involved a reflective act (journaling) on my part, and helped make the analysis forward looking as opposed to backward looking, which happens when a researcher adopts bracketing (Armstrong, 2017). Going over the data iteratively and writing about it in my journal also helped me identify “lines of flight” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), instances where the experiences of my participants were surprising for me.

The previous chapter began by giving a summarised account of each participant’s experiences during the first seven weeks of the semester during which they were interviewed. Themes common to the three participants were then identified. Adopting this structure served dual purposes—firstly, it allowed me to emphasise the unique experiences of each participant, making them a case study in themselves, and justifying my position as a qualitative researcher. Additionally, it allowed me to do the whole-part-whole analysis that Vagle (2016) described under post-intentional phenomenology. Each whole and part has already been detailed in the previous chapter. This chapter will first analyse each of the themes (part) identified not only in light of the existing literature, but also in terms of how I related to the experiences of my participants when I reflected on them. Taking this a step further, I will try to resynthesise the parts together, in order to make sense of them as a new ‘whole’ emerges.

A critically reflective pedagogical approach

The concept of critical reflection, and its relation to dialogue, is central to my research. In a conventional learning environment, dialogue between the students and educators can help the educators critically reflect on their pedagogical practice (Benade, 2015b; Freire, 2005), and make appropriate changes to it in order to suit the needs of their students. All participants in my research, either directly or subtly, talked about their reflective practice, and how it shaped them and their values as an educator. This was a continuous learning journey for them, and based on their own individual experiences (in both their personal and professional lives), they had developed certain ways of engaging with their students.

You are what you have become, and, once you've imbibed something, it becomes part of you, so you do tend to... when you're thinking about your relationships with people, when you're thinking about creative ways to teach and you wouldn't want to necessarily go back to the old ways, so what you've read, what you've studied, adds to your keté of pedagogies and philosophical underpinnings, so they definitely affect how you reflect and listen, and on your further directions...(Dianne; 1)

I try and deeply think about my practice on a daily basis. Every time I'm lecturing, or even when I'm planning lecturing, or during assignments, I'm considering ok, you know I'm evaluating, I'm assessing how it's going, what kind of ideas are coming out of students, how I can challenge them in really positive ways...(Molly; 1)

Similarly, Henry talked about his journey of coming closer to his religion, how he progressed from being a mere believer to practising what his religion taught him, and how that made him more open to accepting criticism in a positive way. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this made him change the way he interacted with his students—initially, he used to have a soft spot for students who respected him more, but after his personal journey of coming closer to religion, he became unbiased and more receptive to differences among his students.

These excerpts highlight the difference between reflective practitioners and critically reflective practitioners. Reflective practitioners are able to assess, either in action or retrospectively, how they are engaging with their students. Based on their evaluation of student interaction and engagement, they then make suitable adjustments to their pedagogy so that their students can benefit out of it. On the other hand, critically reflective practitioners “have an elevated sense of social responsibility to address and tackle inequities in and out of their classrooms to ultimately situate their individual actions and beliefs within larger socio-political contexts” (Hernandez & Endo, 2017, p. 10). Hernandez and Endo (2017) enlist a number of differences

between practitioners who are merely reflective and those who are critically reflective in practice. It is interesting to note that all participants conformed more to being critically reflective rather than simply being reflective. For instance, all participants were cautious of students' experience informing their teaching practices, and also made efforts to reach out to students whose learning preferences and lived experiences were different from their own experiences. The participants also talked about empowering students, helping them to relate to their cultures, and also about how to make their cultural difference an asset for themselves. This finding is of significance, particularly in light of the increasing cultural diversity in New Zealand.

Also of significance is how, while talking to Henry, I could relate to what he was saying. Being an economist in the teaching profession myself, but having had no formal teacher training, I understood how critical reflection is an art that you learn as you gain experience. Also, becoming a critically reflective practitioner is possible only if you foster relationships with your students. As mentioned in the Preface, as long as I kept myself aloof from my students, I remained unaware of their circumstances. As soon as I realised that dialogue with them can bring us closer together in our professional relationship, and can enrich the classroom environment, I was able to critically reflect on my own pedagogical choices and amend them to suit the needs of the student.

All three participants were cognisant of the responsibilities associated with being a tertiary education practitioner, and were making conscious efforts to attend to those responsibilities. For instance, Dianne talked about why she would not be in favour of grading contributions made by students on the online discussion forums.

I also know that [I could give] them 10% if they dropped in 10 times or something... [but] because we're a professional degree, we can say that it [will not] show professionalism...(Dianne; 1)

Similarly, both Dianne and Molly talked about students not being able to attend the face-to-face sessions, but being offered opportunities to engage with the learning material and their fellow students in the online space provided by this blended learning programme. As critically reflective practitioners, they both were mindful of not making assumptions for the reasons due to which their students were unable to attend classes or if they were not interacting enough in class. In fact, reaching out to their students was important. For Molly, this

Help[ed] to answer or address assumptions I may have, ...so, this example that this student who couldn't come to class, so I couldn't

make an assumption that he wasn't wanting to actually participate... that wasn't his circumstance. So being able to actually contact him and have a discussion was more beneficial for him, so that I could be able to support him and be able to engage in the tasks and the learning that he needed in order to address the assessment requirements. (Molly; 1)

Both participants were also well informed about the socio-economic and cultural differences existing between their students.

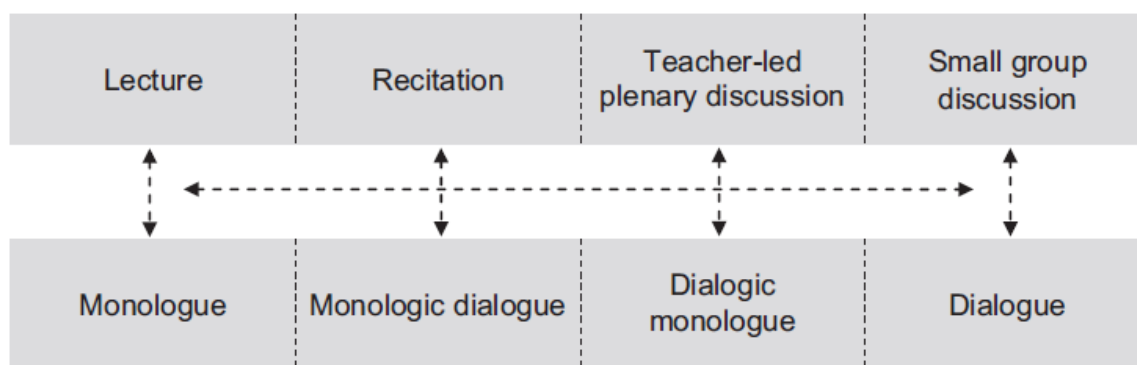
And there's definitely an equity issue between some of the students at [one of the] campus, and some of the students at the [other] campus. I think I wrote about it, that one of the Pasifika students took a while to engage in class because he was embarrassed. (Dianne; 2)

During her second interview, Molly talked about being more mindful while designing online activities in the future, since some students were economically and technologically disadvantaged, and did not have access to the resources required to complete those assessments (such as making videos of themselves and uploading them). The quote above and Molly's experience not only indicate that my participants were critically reflective practitioners, but also invalidates the assumption that the current generation are digital natives (Prensky, 2001). This will be discussed at length as this chapter proceeds.

It is also important to consider here that all my participants had approximately ten years of experience as teachers. Over time, they were able to develop their pedagogical approaches that they were comfortable with, and that helped them become critically reflective practitioners. Given their experience, they were able to carry this practice of being critically reflective forward to the online learning environment. This opens up avenues for further research that would consider if practitioners are able to critically reflect on their pedagogical approaches if they begin their careers by teaching in an online environment as opposed to a conventional, face-to-face, learning environment.

Transitioning from the face-to-face to the online teaching and learning environment: The context of dialogue

The diversity of human speech allows it to be modified according to each context, such as the conditions of communication, the forms of communication, and the goals of communication (Yakubinsky, 1923). As already discussed in the literature review, Skidmore (2016b) related



the amount of exchange of dialogue to the educator being authoritative or democratic. Figure 2 (page 17) is illustrated above again, for ease of reference.

Although Skidmore (2016b) was referring to the degree of dialogism in classroom discourse, the findings from my study, which centres on dialogue in an online teaching and learning environment, can be classified into the same categories. For instance, Henry talked about his preference of being in control of the classroom first, trying to bring all students to an average level of understanding, and then opening the session up for discussion. He carried the same style over to his online sessions as well, and avoided engaging in discussions with his students over the discussion forum. Relating this to the figure above, his style of teaching even in the online environment was more like a monologue. Although he was quick to respond to his students over email, and always replied in detail to make sure their queries were answered, these emails did not involve discussions over actual course content, and revolved more around technical issues related to accessing the course material (See Figure 4).

As opposed to this, Molly and Dianne were on the opposite end of the spectrum. There may be two possible reasons for this. Firstly, both Molly and Dianne adopted a more dialogic approach to teaching in their face-to-face classes, and carried the same approach on to the online learning environment.

Sometimes it's just pointing out a different opinion, sometimes it's pointing out 'Ooh! I missed that! This is important, it could be used in this way', sometimes it's breaking down the barriers, 'Oh, do you mean that people do bring their values into science?'...so it's the positioning of you as a learner alongside of being an expert, and that can occur both online and in the classroom. (Dianne; 1)

Secondly, the exchange of dialogue between them and their students may also be attributable

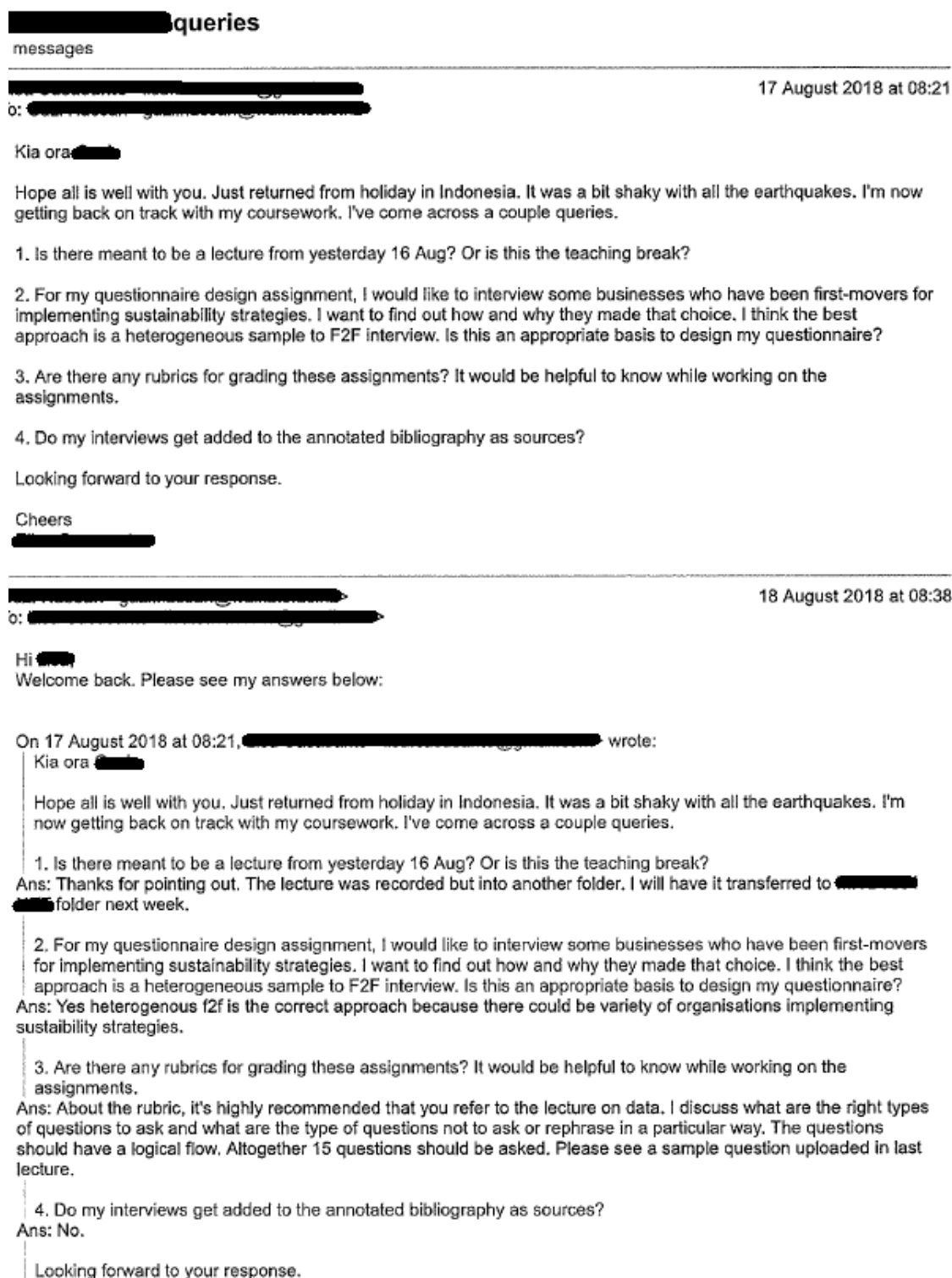


Figure 4: Screenshot of an email sent to Henry (part I)

This screenshot shows how Henry's response to the email resembles a conversation rather than a dialogue. Each question asked by the student has been answered, and there is no unfinalisability or disagreement between them.

to the nature of the degree that they were teaching—a Bachelors of Education degree, which involved initial teacher education, making it absolutely essential to engage in dialogue with their students.

There's not one size fits all in Education, but we talk about the idea that we need to be knowledgeable about the choices that they make, and that's my job...my job is to open the doors so that they can explore it and experience it, and then they make the choice for themselves, because they need to be their teacher. I'm not trying to make models of me...(Molly; 1)

Because you're dealing with people, children are people, and they need to be able to develop skills in dealing with people in a space. But also, they need to be able to develop the skills needed to work with colleagues, and increasingly so, because modern learning environments demand team teaching. They have to be able to absolutely use the online resources and the online platforms and utilise that aspect, but you can't get away from the personal. (Molly; 2)

Another aspect worth analysing is Henry's opinion that any contributions by him in the online discussion forum would not have encouraged his students to comment more. This opinion can find some support for itself in the existing literature, since there are conflicting findings regarding this. For instance, Nandi, Hamilton and Harland (2012) find that student-instructor interaction is one of the most critical factors in enhancing student satisfaction in an online course. On the other hand, Mazzolini and Maddison (2003) categorised instructor participation as "sage on the stage", "guide on the side", or "ghost in the wings". They wanted to see if the style in which instructors participated in discussion forums had an impact on how often students posted, lengths of their post and student perception. Their study concluded that there was little correlation between instructor's participation style and student's post. In a subsequent study in 2007, they found that as instructor's posts increased, the students not only posted less frequently, but also less in length. An, Shin, and Lim (2009) also found that too much of instructor participation can result in students interacting less with each other, as they focus more on interacting with the instructor rather than with their peers.

If Henry's opinion is analysed in context of the rationale given by him for the low level of contributions made by his students, then it adds a new layer of understanding. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, Henry related the amount of interaction to its weight in assessments. Since the comments made on the discussion forum were ungraded, the students did not make the effort to engage with other students on that platform. Dianne and Molly also

held the same belief; Molly even verified this by the response she got from her students when she asked them why they were not engaging enough.

They're not, and that's what I had asked the students in class. I see that you're not engaging, how can I...why are you not engaging? What can I do to help you to engage in this platform? And they said that honestly, if there was a grade attached, we'd do it, but we're busy people and we don't see it as a priority. Even though the online component has been designed to be linked to the assignments, so if they'd completed these online tasks, it would have helped them to be successful with their assignments. But they didn't see it as necessarily useful. (Molly; 2)

Motivating students to participate in and contribute to online discussions is challenging (Balaji & Chakrabarti, 2010). Although my participants talked about this in the context of the online part of the course being ungraded, there are several other reasons offered in published literature. Cabrera and Cabrera (2002) talk about the knowledge sharing dilemma in line with the strategic choices made by individuals participating in discussion forums. According to them, individuals may not be inclined to share their knowledge in a virtual community because the process of knowledge sharing may involve significant costs (e.g. making that knowledge available to others) and, more important, because individuals' refusal to share knowledge with others may appear to be the most advantageous strategy in securing their benefit within a knowledge sharing context. In contrast to this, Gerbic (2006) identified the need to exchange ideas and seek feedback from instructors as one of the main motivators for participation in discussion forums.

Also, consistent with Baran, Correia, and Thompson (2011), Henry acknowledged online students being more responsible in their learning and setting goals for themselves, and also talked about the role of the educator in very carefully guiding them to achieve these goals.

So net students are different from general students. So for them, they are already mature through their experience. That's my view – so, they don't need to be spoon fed, but they need to be intelligently shown the key work... basically leading them towards *their* objectives, towards their goals. (Henry; 1)

Although he did not engage in discussion with his students on the discussion forum, the screenshots of the emails he shared revealed that he did guide his students how to navigate through the course, talked about how they could extend their research, and also how he could be of assistance to them if they decided to pursue more research. A screenshot of the final email out of a series of emails exchanged between him and a student is given in Figure 5. The response of the student shows how the research topic that he has chosen has been finalised after

Dear [REDACTED] I hope all is well.

I have amended my topic slightly to be;

" Insensitivity in Social Media and the Strategies and Response of Organizational Management – the case of a South Waikato Secondary School.

I have amended the topic in this way so I can include the Response of the Principal of the High School from which I will be able to gather an in-depth interview and perspective (I have already discussed the issues and know his strategy used and the consequences etc as the incident played out and I will be able to get another interview from him if you need me to.)

I noted as I was researching, the literature does cover a lot of material regarding intercultural awareness and training for Managers and a tiny bit about racism in schools so I will be using that literature as it aligns with the evidence that I have from the Social Media incident and the school response.

Another feature of what happened in the incident was a lot of online bullying and misunderstanding. I think its best that I save those aspects for my dissertation as I can do further research as required with other schools and students in the future and link it all together. Hopefully I have enough material with a solid literature review, the response from the school, and some social media messages for the purposes of getting through this 501 assignment. If I need to sharpen up this Tokoroa High School case study aspect of the dissertation when I eventually arrive at my dissertation I am happy to go further but I am assuming that can wait until the plan for the dissertation is put in place.

I hope this makes sense and hopefully I have followed your advice correctly to include the Management response and aspects to this. As my dissertation will be a Strategic Management dissertation it only makes perfect sense to concentrate on the Management aspects of dealing with Social Media incidents so thank you very much for your advice in helping me to pull this together.

For my annotated bibliography I will perhaps annotate 8 articles but I do have a lot of other journal articles and 2 theses on the issues at this stage.

Please let me know if this is okay or if I need to do anything further and hopefully I will have the annotated bibliography assignment to you on time. (I am trying my best as unfortunately there have been alot of unforeseen events over the past few weeks.)

Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Nga mihi [REDACTED]

Figure 5: A screenshot of an email sent to Henry by a student (part II)

carefully considering the advice offered by Henry. The exchange of emails over the same topic show elements of dialogue between the student and Henry.

As already cited in Chapter Two, not all conversations are dialogic in nature; in order to be dialogic, the conversation must be characterised with unfinalisability and constant disagreement with each other (Nikulin, 2010). A careful analysis of these emails shows that while some of them are dialogic in nature (see Figure 5), others are simply conversations. A screenshot of another email sent by a student, and Henry's reply to it, is attached as Figure 6. As is evident, there are no elements of dialogue in this particular instance.

Re: [REDACTED] Announcements: Case Study

2 messages

11 September 2018 at 12:11

To: [REDACTED]

Hi [REDACTED]

I just wanted to let you know that when I submitted my Questionnaire assignment this morning which was due at midday today, I got a submission notice to say that it was 62 days late. That I assume is because the submission times for assignments in Moodle are still all still set at 11 July.

Kind Regards
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

On Mon, 10 Sep 2018 at 14:41, [REDACTED] (via Moodle) [REDACTED] wrote:

[REDACTED] » Forums » Announcements » Case Study



Case Study

by [REDACTED] - Monday, 10 September 2018, 2:35 PM

Case_Study.pdf

Hi All,

Please find attached the case study, due next week's Friday - 21 Sep 2018.

This is the Case Study 4 available in Chapter 4 of your required text. I am attaching a photocopy of that in the pdf file. You will need to answer the 3 questions which are found at the end of the case. Your answers will be based on the materials found up to Chapter 4 of your text book and perhaps Chapter 5 may also be helpful. You can choose any other materials found elsewhere in management books, journals or newspapers. Remember to give citations where necessary. A rough estimate is that you try to finish answering each question within 250 words (that is 750 words for 3 questions) but you may exceed that limit up a 1000 words if necessary. This is the maximum limit which can't be crossed.

Kind regards
[REDACTED]

[See this post in context](#)

[Change your forum digest preferences](#)

11 September 2018 at 13:56

To: [REDACTED]

Yes it is alright. don't worry.
[REDACTED]

Figure 6: A screenshot of another email sent to Henry, and his reply (part III)

It is worth reiterating here that all three participants also talked about the online learning environment being inherently different from the conventional, face-to-face learning environment. These differences included not only opportunities offered by the online learning environment that were not there in a conventional learning environment, but also new challenges that practitioners and students faced in making the learning journey valuable. For them, this meant that the two learning environments could not be compared to each other, and

hence, the nature of dialogue had to be different in each. The next section discusses how dialogic pedagogy can be adapted to fit in the online environment.

Absence of dialogue in the online learning environment

It is evident from the previous chapter that for my participants, the amount of engagement amongst the students, and between the teachers and the students, was not where it ideally should have been. On the contrary, as the semester progressed, the amount of interaction declined. A significant point to note from this was the critical reflection by the participants on the absence of dialogue, rather than its presence. This further supports an earlier discussion: being critically reflective was likely to be a habit instilled in my participants through the years spent in the face-to-face teaching and learning context as opposed to being developed in the online learning context. This relates to my own journey as a practitioner; having spent approximately eight years teaching at the undergraduate level led me to adopt dialogic pedagogical tools during my interaction with my students. Not seeing the same dialogue developing between my students and their external tutor in a blended learning environment made me question the role of the external tutor. The lack of dialogue can be attributed to several reasons; the ones that stood out from the experiences of my participants are discussed below.

Consistency

The online space was considered a place where students were given the opportunity to interact among themselves. It was not compulsory for the teachers to interact with their students in the discussion forum; doing so was their own choice. During the first interview, the teachers talked about their intention of responding to their students on the discussion forum intermittently. They believed this would signal to the students that their interaction was being monitored, and perhaps encourage them to interact more amongst themselves.

I think at total lack [of interaction between me and the students], they would be negatively impacted. If I make an effort to pop in once a week, that would be wonderful for them...as in, even just 'Hey great! Fabulous!' It's at least saying to them: I care. (Dianne; 1)

During the second interview, however, the participants acknowledged their inconsistent engagement with their students in the online platform.

No, I don't respond to it. I just give them a topic and they're supposed to discuss it. Then I look at it later on, but I don't comment...(Henry; 2)

I also think that the lack of actual communication between people—it was just that they were posting it and then no one is reading it, including the lecturer, decreased their motivation. (Molly; 2)

Overall, there is mixed evidence of the influence of instructor participation on student engagement. Some find a positive relationship (Jiang & Ting, 2000), some find no relationship (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003), and some even find a negative relationship (Murphy, Fortner & Mukherjee; 2014), suggesting that student interaction declined as instructor participation increased. Hew and Cheung (2012) talk about the importance of both peer facilitation and instructor facilitation on discussion forums. Based on nine case studies, they discuss situations where students prefer peer facilitation and where they prefer instructor facilitation. Peer facilitation makes the participating students feel at ease with each other. The students also take greater ownership of the discussion, and this allows them to reflect on other students' ideas to a greater extent. On the other hand, instructor facilitation helps to keep the discussion on topic and set explicit expectations for the discussion. It is also useful in instances where the topic of discussion is new and requires expert knowledge. Finally, instructor facilitation can help resolve conflicts in discussion forums.

The above has interesting parallels with Freire's concept of dialogic pedagogy. Although Freire was in favour of a dialogical relationship between the student and teachers as they co-constructed knowledge, he labelled the relationship between educators and learner as being "complex, fundamental, and difficult" (Freire, 2005, p. 107). Freire (2005, p. 99) also noted that teachers "who never assume authority in the classroom and instead, who constantly show weakness, doubt, and insecurity in their relationship with the learners" are unable to gain control over their class. In the process of being dialogical, educators have to make sure they maintain an authoritative (but not authoritarian) position over the learners. Similarly, he talked about educators staying true to their words, citing examples from his own experience where students would be waiting to identify opportunities where they could find educators contradicting what they had said before, and thereby exert pressure on them for doing so. In the same manner, even if the relationship between the learners and educators is not as dialogic in an online environment as it might be in a conventional, face-to-face environment, the educator still has an important role to play in moderating whatever discussions are taking place. Also, by regularly commenting on the students' discussion, online educators can give a signal

to their students that there is value to be gained by interacting with each other on the discussion forums. If the educator's presence declines, the students' participation may also start wavering off.

This finding is also in line with my own experiences of teaching in a synchronous, blended learning environment. I found that communication between the students and their teacher could be impaired due to technical issues, such as poor Internet connection or echoing of the voice as they spoke in their microphone. If this continued from one week to the next, the students would be demotivated to attend their online classes, since they would feel that those sessions were a waste of time and offered little to learn from. They felt they could learn more from the face-to-face sessions of their course rather than the online ones. My experience, therefore, also speaks of consistent interaction with the educator as a motivating factor for students to be more engaged with their tasks.

Grading discussion forums

Another common theme that emerged across all three participants was their belief that students would have engaged more in the online discussion forums if their participation had been assessed. Assessment has a critical role to play in determining what students learn and how they learn it (Ross, Siegenthaler & Tronson, 2006). Whether online participation should be assessed or not, and how it should be assessed, is debated in the existing literature. Although assessing the online discussion forum may serve as an incentive for students to participate more, educators must keep in mind that they must assess the quality, and not the quantity, of the posts made by a student (Lam, 2004). Assessing online discussion forums encourages students to demonstrate their learning, enhances their reflective practice, and promotes collaborative learning by student interaction (Quinn & McNamara, 2009).

Although all three participants were not grading the contributions made by their students, they were not pleased with the lack of interaction amongst their students. Consequently, Henry and Molly intended to assign some weight to contributions made by their students in the online discussion forums in the next semester.

So maybe this is also my reflection on this semester, that next time I will make the discussion graded as well, so that there are more discussions. This is also something that I have concluded from my first experience of teaching. (Henry; 2)

But now that I've done it [ungraded discussion forums] for a semester, I can say let's see how I can make this part of my assessment, and put the proposal in for my next year. (Molly; 2)

For Dianne, grading the online discussion forums would not have shown professionalism. As she was teaching papers for an initial teacher education degree, she felt that compelling students to contribute by linking their contribution to their grades would not make them self-responsible teachers. The online space was meant to be a space for them to take ownership of and interact in. Therefore, rather than encouraging participation by inducing them with grades, she felt that a better way would have been through modelling it: although it was not compulsory for her to respond to her students' comments, she would still do so occasionally and therefore signal to her students that there was value in it for them if they interacted.

This was an interesting observation for me: having studied and then taught in a developing country, where the norm is to apply mandatory decisions to individuals rather than allowing them to make informed decisions themselves, it is usual to have weight assigned to attendance and class participation in conventional teaching environments. In online learning environments, the final grade consists of a weight assigned to the number of times a student participates over the discussion forum⁶. As opposed to this, allowing students the *choice* to participate on the discussion forum, and encouraging them to participate by modelling it, offered new insights to me.

Access to resources

Another reason identified by my participants for the absence of dialogue was inequitable access to resources. Interacting in the online environment required access to resources, such as a reliable Internet connection and a computer. Although the universities where my participants were employed do provide support to students who do not have access to these resources, my participants talked about social stigmas attached to seeking support for these resources. This was particularly true for the blended learning paper as opposed to the fully online paper. In the fully online paper, students were already aware of the resources required and opted to enrol in it only if they had access to them.

⁶ For instance, the Virtual University of Pakistan, one of the largest providers of online education, makes it compulsory for students to post on the discussion forum. For more information, visit <http://orientation.vu.edu.pk/GeneralInformation/GeneralInformation.htm>

I do wonder how the online learning space will be accessible (or not) to some of our students. For example, I am aware of one student that does not have access to Internet at home and must go to other locations to access these resources. Does having [limited access to] the online world limit the learning for some students?...I am aware that the university offers support in this area; however, is there potentially social stigmas/ cultural barriers associated with seeking these services...Is this equitable? (Molly; RL)

A similar situation was reported in the previous chapter, where students did not know how to make videos of themselves and upload them, thus limiting their ability to complete the assignments for the online part of the course. Therefore, having access to resources does not necessarily imply that the students can use these resources effectively as well. This has already been discussed in the literature review, and several studies have been cited that point to the current generation being labelled as the “net generation” and being called “digital natives” as erroneous (Facer & Selwyn, 2013; Henderson et. al, 2015; Jelfs & Richardson, 2013). A similar observation was made by Dianne:

And I guess not being surprised that some of the students don't know their way around it, and they're slower in coming in to these kind of technological things. I mean they might be brilliant on Twitter, but they might not be brilliant on this...(Dianne; 2)

Although technological competency is not age-dependent (Lai & Hong, 2015), my participants did find some connection between more experienced students being more responsible in doing the online work, and also having deeper meaning in the comments that they made. The next section discusses this at length.

Year of study

As mentioned above, a common observation across all three participants was that students who were older took up greater responsibility while doing the online part of the course. In Henry's case, where he was teaching a fully online course, he could observe a marked difference in attitude between his online students and his students in the face-to-face class that he was teaching. His observations were that while his net students could allocate less time to the course work due to their other commitments (related to work and family), they would concentrate more during that time. On the other hand, the students studying in a conventional learning environment generally did not have other commitments such as these, and while it may seem

they would spend more time engaging with the course content, they would focus less and be easily distracted while doing so. Dianne reflected along a similar aspect in her journal:

What is interesting is that the older students, especially those from who have worked before are more likely to engage. (Dianne; RL)

Molly also felt that her older students (who were now in the final year of their degree) would comment less, but more meaningfully as opposed to those students in the first year of their degree, who would comment more frequently but superficially. She reflected on the implications of this with regards to how the school at the university where she was teaching could assist younger students to learn how to engage with each other in an online environment.

It's interesting because I look back on it and I think we could make more connections across papers, so an example would be the Professional Practice papers that we have... I wonder, in those papers, are they having discussions around what is a critical professional discussion, and what qualities should you be using in terms of your own way in which it's delivered, and how you accept it—do they talk about it, I'm not sure. And if they don't, then do I need to incorporate it into my own paper so that I can increase respectful professional dialogue between students? (Molly; 2)

She also discussed how she was trying to do this herself:

So online, the comments I've made aren't 'you did this wrong, you did this right', it's 'Oh, I see where you're coming from...I wonder, what if this...', or 'how would this connect to what we talked about in class about this, this and this...does this influence how you look at it?' So it's about provoking different ways of thinking, I think, and helping them make connections across a broader context. (Molly; 2)

A screenshot from Molly's reflective log, which had emails of some of the responses she had made to her students, is given in Figure 7. This provide further evidence of her encouraging her students to be critically reflective of what they're saying in the online learning environment, and suggest that there may be a potential role that the educators can play in carefully guiding their students to be more active in the online discussion forum.

Published literature suggests that the link between online learner characteristics and their learning outcomes has not been clearly established, with different studies coming to different conclusions (Yukselturk & Top, 2012). Some studies find that online courses are more appealing to people who are employed, whether part time or full time (Kim, Kwon, & Cho, 2011; Colorado & Eberle, 2010), and to those trying to find a balance between their family commitments and studies (Kormos & Csizer, 2014). Li and Wan (2016) reported similar characteristics for completers of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) as opposed to those

For example, one online learning task asked students to practice some analytical skills discussed/ experienced in class (linked to assignment one). Examples of my responses to student XXX and student ZZZ are below.

Kia ora XXX,

Based on what we discussed in lecture this week around number sense - specifically around number meanings - i wonder how this activity relates to cardinality, nominality and ordinality? How long do you think it might take for students to move from whole numbers where students are constructing understandings of number meanings to decimal understandings? Is this a consideration you might think about?

Kindest regards,

Kia ora ZZZ,

I wonder how you could expand your understandings around the impact of students when they are learning with each other (e.g. group learning - ability groups or mixed ability groupings). Would this be an important consideration for you with the first assessment?

Kindest regards,

Figure 7: Molly's responses to her students

who drop out. Focusing on a professional training MOOC, they found that completers have more previous learning experience and do not face any significant difficulty in the learning process. As opposed to this, those who are more reliant on support services have a greater tendency to eventually drop out of the course. There have also been some studies focusing on specific characteristics of online learners (such as age, gender, social status, etc.), but that was beyond the scope of my research. In general, however, my participants found their older students to be more responsible in engaging with the online work.

For me, this observation is true not only for the online teaching and learning environment, but also for a face-to-face teaching and learning environment. As students transition from schools into universities, they often are overwhelmed by the freedom they have in universities as opposed to schools (for instance, with regards to choosing whether to attend classes or not).

Consequently, they spend the first semester or so trying to get used to this, and may seem to be irresponsible. Over time, as they learn the value of attending classes, they start acting more responsibly and attend classes regularly.

Analysing the absence of dialogue: The role of the education institution

The absence of dialogue must be analysed in context of the role that the educational institution itself can play as it moves from offering courses in the conventional way towards an online learning environment. Haugen and Metcalf (2018) talk about the need for instructors to understand the institution's online teaching policies before planning an online course. This may include, but is not be limited to, educators being aware of the expectations from them, the kind of workload they will be expected to handle, the type of support that will be available for them and the students, how the institution will be assessing online courses, the type of course evaluations students will be doing, and how the faculty will be evaluated.

The experiences of my participants resonated with what has been cited above. Dianne and Molly talked about this more explicitly, and discussed it from the point of view of both their students and themselves as lecturers.

I think the perception is for the students, who are new to this, that its additional work that they're not getting any credit for. So the perception isn't quite right yet. And I think even with us lecturers... [the online work] is not timetabled, which makes it a little bit harder to actually give the students the feedback that they really need to feel it's worthwhile with the pressure of work... and probably the other issue is that to do blended learning really well, it's often that you need to have some really short, sharp, fit for purpose type activities that work really well, and I guess the amount of planning to put something like that online, it creates a greater demand than actually preparing for face to face. (Dianne; 1)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Dianne also discussed how this shift to a blended form of learning was perceived by herself and other teaching staff at the School of Education as a cost-saving exercise.

I think it's been top driven, rather than bottom driven, and it has been top driven rather than saying 'this is what the literature says, this is why we think you should be involved in this rather than because it's a cost saving exercise'. So, I think it's...for us to really embed in it and do it well, there always needs to be the literature base for it and probably more support. (Dianne; 1)

A similar statement was made two decades ago by David Nobel (1998), in his article titled “Digital diploma mills: The automation of higher education”. While discussing how two large universities in North America, York University and University of California, Los Angeles, had made it mandatory to use computer telecommunications technology in the delivery of higher education, he said:

It is no accident, then, that the high-tech transformation of higher education is being initiated and implemented from the top down, either without any student and faculty involvement in the decision making, or despite it. (p. 108)

Molly expressed a similar concern, and the following lengthy quote helps to situate the conflict that educators themselves face as an institution transitions from a conventional teaching and learning environment towards incorporating an online teaching and learning environment with it:

...I’m starting to question actually: Is the way that we have approached it [blended learning] this year, being the first year in an initial teacher education programme, are we actually just doing it to ‘tick a box’, which I feel that actually we are, because we’re required to begin this process of an online learning component. And I also am very aware that they also did it to solve staffing issues and workload issues, meaning that they took one hour of face-to-face away, and they added an online component. I don’t think it’s bad to have another platform, and I think it’s good to be able to encourage and to entice people who for example couldn’t come to class to still be engaged, but question, if you take the time away from the in-class time and the preparation for in-class time and you don’t give it to the online, then how can you actually make that quality? (Molly; 2)

Although Henry did not explicitly talk about facing any issues at the tertiary institution where he was teaching, his words suggested that online educators had considerable flexibility in deciding which pedagogical tools to adopt for their paper. For instance, he chose not to engage with his students in the discussion forum because it was not mandatory for the online educator to do so. Similarly, although he chose to upload videos of his face-to-face lectures for his online students, it was not mandatory for educators to do so. In the absence of clear guidelines, faculty-related issues can arise, especially when they have to collaborate with a team on online course development (Haugen & Metcalf, 2018). Also, in case where the lecturers lack technology skills, or are unable to adapt their pedagogy for the online learning environment, they become challenged with an increased workload and often find it difficult to allocate enough time to their online students (Haugen & Metcalf, 2018).

These concerns need to be analysed in light of the ‘politics of technology in higher education’, part of which has already been reviewed in Chapter 2. To build upon it further, it is worth citing the following by Holford, Hodge, Milana, Waller and Webb (2018):

For decades, university teachers have responded to successive assaults in cowed silence. Politicians and the press have preached the gospel of globalisation: markets as inevitable, technological advance as inexorable, flexibility as panacea. In the process, academic staff—teachers and researchers—have been dismissed by the thousand to cover costs; subjects have been reinvented as budgetary units, to be realigned, grown or downsized at whim; intellectual integrity, disciplinary knowledge, professional relationships, personal careers and lives have come a very distant second to the transient needs of financial viability and reputation.

As suggested by the above, most institutions pay little attention to the voice of the educators. Additionally, although institutions claim to increase accessibility for students who previously were not able to access higher education, they fail to consider the special needs of these students who are not able to attend traditional classes for a variety of reasons. Along with providing access, education institutions must recognise their prior situations and needs, and accommodate them accordingly (Lee, 2017). For instance, although it is often assumed that distant learners are more independent and responsible in completing their online tasks, research also talks about such learners reporting that they lack skills to self-regulate their learning and struggle with time management (Sáiz, 2013). Consequently, drop-out rates are higher among distance learners as compared to face-to-face learners (Levy, 2007). Similarly, academically less proficient students also need extra support as they enter distance education, since they often encounter challenges they were not prepared for. As a result, those who actually benefit from distance education are those who are already academically well prepared and well-resourced in terms of funds and time (Choi, Lee, Jung & Letchem, 2013).

This again suggests the need for educators teaching in an online learning environment to be more critically reflective of the relationships they develop with their students. As identified by my participants as well, the defining feature of conventional teaching over online teaching was the ability to develop relationships with their students. Having some knowledge about the background of their students, and using that knowledge to personalise the learning experience of their students was made possible through interacting with the students in person. In the online learning environment, despite having this knowledge about the students, there was still a space between the teacher and students that could not be filled, as testified by Henry. One possible way of filling this space may be to engage in more dialogue with their students in the

online learning environment. Freire (1993) referred to these relationships in terms of love, humility, faith and trust. For him, “founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence...whereas faith in humankind is an *apriori* requirement for dialogue, trust is established by dialogue” (p. 91). In practice, however, this may be difficult to achieve by the already over-burdened teaching staff. Finding alternatives to dialogue, some of which have been discussed by my participants, may be another possible solution.

Alternatives to dialogue

The previous chapter showed how, anticipating that dialogue would be constrained in the online learning environment, my participants developed alternate ways to keep their students engaged. For instance, Dianne made use of the e-learning portfolio offered through Mahara, Molly asked her students to make videos of themselves discussing a topic discussed in class and upload it, while Henry uploaded videos of the sessions he had with his face-to-face students for his online students. These practices will be discussed here in light of the existing literature.

Adding a ‘human element’ to the online learning environment

Learning environments that depart from conventional, face-to-face classrooms, are known to provide opportunities to those students to learn who may find it difficult to attend regular classes. At the same time, however, there is also the challenge that learning in the online environment is at least as meaningful as would be in a conventional classroom, if not better. Although both these aspects have been discussed at length in Chapter Two, I will briefly revisit them here in order to be able to highlight how my participants articulated them during their interviews. One challenge identified is that distance learning may develop a sense of isolation and alienation among the students, making it difficult for a community of inquiry to thrive (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Hendricks, 2016). Coming to this conclusion may require the researcher to get the perspective of the students to understand how they experienced online learning. Nonetheless, from the point of view of the educator, my participants reflected upon this by talking about the importance of building relationships with their students. In fact, one of the beliefs that was commonly shared by all three participants was that the online learning

environment made it difficult for them to develop meaningful relationships with their students, because “there’s more scope for misunderstandings” (Dianne; 1) on the online platform.

In order to build these relationships, the participants talked about attempting to bring the experience of students in the online learning environment closer to what they would experience in a face-to-face classroom. Dianne and Molly did this by uploading videos of themselves giving feedback to their students. Henry recorded his class lectures and uploaded them for his online students. When asked why they did this, they all talked about this as a means of building relationships with their students in the online platform. Henry also talked about being unsure whether his students would be understanding the course content or not, but for him, uploading videos of his recorded lectures helped bring online learning a step closer to face-to-face learning. He felt that this allowed him to do some averaging: if the mix of the students was the same in his online class and in his face-to-face class, and if on average, students were able to grasp concepts in the face-to-face class, then he could assume that his online students would also be able to grasp them.

The need to add this human element, and communicating with students, finds parallels in Freire’s concept of dialogic pedagogy. Freire (1993) criticised the narrative character of teacher-student relationships, which involve a “narrating subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students)” (p. 71). When such a relationship exists, the students are turned “into “containers”, into “receptacles” to be “filled” by the teacher” (p. 71). Freire distinguished this “banking concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing deposits” (p. 72), from ‘problem-posing education’ which had dialogue as its defining characteristic:

Indeed, problem-posing education, which breaks with the vertical patterns characteristic of banking education, can fulfil its function as the practice of freedom only if it can overcome the above contradiction. Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-student and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teachers. (Freire, 1993, p. 80)

Freire (2005) also titled his seventh letter in *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare teach* as ‘From talking to learners to talking to them and with them; from listening to learners to being heard by them’. The transitions in this title deserve careful thought and consideration. In order to make these transitions, Freire (2005) emphasised education as a non-neutral and political act. Such political transformations require the existence of relationships, and dialogue, between the teacher and the learners.

Design of the online task

The literature review in Chapter Two discussed the need for online learners to be self-disciplined and committed to learning. With attrition rates among online students being 10% to 20% higher than in face-to-face learning (Gray, 2015), there is a need to investigate factors that lead to this higher dropout, and how educators can find ways to increase student engagement to keep them from dropping out. Research shows that simply transferring classroom course material to an online learning environment is the least effective way to develop an online course (Haugen & Metcalf, 2018).

Dianne talked about having “short, fit-for-purpose” activities for the online part of her course. One way suggested in the existing literature for designing online work is to develop it as “bite-sized learning”, which involves breaking the lesson down into small, bite-sized chunks that are delivered on a daily basis. These chunks include not only knowledge, but also require interaction with peers/other students on a daily basis. Although this has the advantage of helping learners prioritise online learning and increasing participation, it does reduce the flexibility offered by online learning (Gray, 2015). Chapter Four also referred to my participants’ recognising that there are inherent differences between the online learning environment and the face-to-face learning environment. Therefore, they needed to adopt different pedagogical tools when engaging with students in these two different learning environments. Consequently, my participants looked for suitable alternates to dialogue to engage better with the students. For instance, Dianne made use of the Mahara. She encouraged her students to make their profiles, and upload artefacts of what they were learning as the course progressed. To support her students in doing this, she first scheduled an appointment with the IT support offered by her university to learn how to do this herself, and then demonstrated it during one of the face-to-face sessions she had with them. While checking their assignments, Dianne would randomly open up her students’ profiles to verify if they could support what they were saying. Having electronic profiles of her students allowed her to go back to them whenever she wanted to, just as educators can go back to discussion forums when need be to see how their students are engaging with the course content and with each other. A screenshot of one such profile made by her student is attached as Figure 8.

The need to make both pedagogical changes and changes to the course content, points to the need for universities to consider training teachers to be able to teach in the online environment.

The experience of my participants resonated with my own experiences of teaching in an online environment. Developing personalised relationships with their students is challenging for educators who are teaching in an online environment. The missing link that hinders the development of these relationships is the promptness of dialogue that would be possible in a face-to-face teaching and learning environment, but is not there in an online environment. Despite this, the prior teaching experience that my participants had allowed them to bring their critically reflective habits into the online environment as well. As a result, expecting that dialogue would have been constrained, my participants took steps before hand to develop alternates to dialogue, so that they could help their students get the most out of their learning experience. In the following chapter, I will further elaborate these thoughts.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Introduction

The motivation behind this research was to extend Freire's concept of dialogic pedagogy (1993), and Dewey's concept of critical reflection (1933), to the online learning environment. In particular, it explored how practitioners critically reflect on their pedagogical choices based on their dialogue with their students in the online teaching and learning environment. This chapter provides concluding reflections on my research. It begins with a brief review of the rationale of this research, the research question it aimed to answer, and the methodology used to collect and analyse data. It then goes on to discuss the main findings from the research, and how they potentially add value to the existing literature. Finally, after recognising the shortcomings of this research, it concludes by suggesting and how further research can be channelled out from where this research ends.

Recapitulating the journey so far

The underlying assumption for this research has been that dialogue between the teachers and students helps the teachers to critically reflect on their pedagogy. This assumption finds support in the work of Paulo Freire (1993), who favoured 'problem-posing education' over 'banking education'. Engaging with dialogue lets the teachers become aware of the past experiences of their students, allowing the teacher to better understand the perspective of their students. In other words, dialogue fosters the development of relationships between teachers and students, which in turn helps teachers to critically reflect on their pedagogy, and adopt approaches most suited to their students. As these discussions unfold, the teachers get an opportunity to co-construct knowledge with their students. In an online teaching and learning environment, this dialogue is constrained. Despite technological advancements, which go as far as making synchronous online interaction possible between teachers and learners sitting in different parts of the world, the fact remains that dialogue is not as free-flowing and unhindered as it would be in a face-to-face classroom (McDaniels, Pfund & Barnicle, 2016). Similarly, asynchronous online learning often involves written communication via discussion boards, which is open to misinterpretation and is also often characterised by lack of student involvement (Fear &

Erikson-Brown, 2014). This research, therefore, questioned the opportunities available for online educators to critically reflect on their pedagogy. Given these constraints, it also aimed to find out more about the ways used by online educators to develop a dialogic pedagogy with their online students. In particular, it sought to answer the following research question:

How do teachers working in virtual learning environments construct their notions of critical reflection, and what strategies do they develop to encourage a critically reflective dialogical pedagogical relationship with their students?

In the course of this research, I interviewed three online educators to establish their experiences of transitioning from teaching in a face-to-face environment towards teaching in an online environment. Although the participants were teaching in different tertiary institutions in New Zealand, and were therefore using different learning management systems, what was common to all three of them was that they had only begun teaching in the online environment in the semester that they were interviewed. At the same time, each participant had taught in a conventional, face-to-face classroom environment for approximately ten years.

The data collection procedure involved each participant being interviewed twice. The first interview was scheduled during the first week of the semester that commenced in July 2018. During this interview, we talked about their prior professional experience, and the expectations they had about the paper that they were teaching online in that particular semester. We also talked about their perceptions about dialogic pedagogy and critical reflection. This not only allowed me to get to know my participants better, but also ensured that the participants knew what was expected from them during the time that they had agreed to participate in the research. Having discussions around these topics also allowed me to build a comfort zone with my participants, which helped us to be at ease with each other during our second interview. The second interview, which was held approximately eight to ten weeks into the semester, focused on the individual experiences of teaching in an online environment for each of the participants. In particular, our discussion centred on whether dialogue helped the participants to critically reflect on their pedagogical choices.

The second source of data for this research were the reflective journals that my participants were asked to maintain. They had been asked to write in them on a fortnightly basis during the first seven weeks of the semester, so that they could trace their pedagogic journey of starting

to teach in an online environment. They were also requested to take screenshots of any critical moments of their interaction with their students in the online space, or of their students' interaction with each other. This allowed me to understand their experiences better, since I was not observing the discussion forums they had created for their students. These journals were also discussed during the second interview, which helped me to situate what my participants were talking about in these.

Recognising my own prior experience of teaching in a blended learning environment, I knew I would have some expectations myself of what the experience of these educators might be like. I was also aware of the fact that while some of these experiences might be similar to mine, others may be contrary to what I had experienced myself. Making use of post-intentional phenomenology allowed me to acknowledge my own prior experiences, while at the same time develop and understand new meanings out of the experiences of my participants (Vagle, 2016). In order to do so, I wrote in a reflective journal myself over the three months that I was collecting and analysing data. I listened to the audio recordings of each interview at least three times, and read the transcript several times. I also read the journals of my participants numerous times. Each time I did so, I would relate the experiences of my participants to my own experiences and to the published research I had read while conducting this research, and note my own thoughts in my journal. This helped me to continuously find new ways to make meaning out of the data I had gathered.

The data I gathered was then analysed with the help of NVivo, a software application that assists in organising qualitative data. This helped me group together experiences that my participants had in common. It also allowed me to recursively find themes that stood out as being meaningful and unique, and therefore contribute to the existing literature. The following section discusses the main conclusions that can be drawn from my study.

Conclusion 1: Becoming a critically reflective practitioner through experience

The interviews and reflective logs maintained by my participants revealed that they were critically reflective practitioners. It is worthwhile to reiterate here that they understood the difference between reflection and critical reflection. For them, critical reflection was not merely a retrospective activity. On the contrary, the participants were taking into consideration

the specific circumstances of their students rather than making assumptions based on what they said (or did not say, in the case of some students) (Mann, 2016). All three participants were critically reflecting on their interaction with the students in the online teaching and learning environment despite the fact that they were not pleased with the student engagement and the amount and depth of dialogue in the online space. On the surface, this may point to the link between dialogic pedagogy and critical reflection as not being applicable to the experiences of my participants. On deeper inspection, however, I realised that my participants were actually reflecting on the ‘absence of dialogue’ rather than on the ‘presence of dialogue’. For me, this relates to the rich experience my participants had in teaching in a conventional, face-to-face classroom environment. Their experience had them well equipped with the necessary pedagogical tools and understanding needed to critically reflect on their practice as they transitioned from the conventional environment to the online environment.

Conclusion 2: Critically reflecting on the absence of dialogue

The first conclusion, coupled with the published literature I read, very fluidly brought me to my second conclusion. My participants were reflecting on the absence of dialogue, and were not only wondering about possible reasons for why their students were not interacting amongst themselves, but were equally accepting the fact that they themselves were not interacting enough with their students in the online space for dialogue. Also, although they had tried to actively contribute to the comments made by students on the discussion forum, they admitted to their own efforts of doing so going down as the semester commenced. My participants also talked about the importance given to the online learning environment by the administration of the tertiary institution they were teaching at. In particular, Molly and Dianne felt that the rationale for moving towards teaching in the online space was based on administrative convenience as opposed to being backed theoretically by what the literature said. Published literature over the last two to three decades has highlighted similar concerns, where the voices of students and lecturers have not been taken into consideration by the university administration while planning such transitions (Haugan & Metcalf, 2018; Holford et. al., 2018; Nobel, 1998). Similarly, Henry had opted to teach an online paper because he felt that if he did not gain experience of teaching online, he would soon find himself jobless. His teaching online, therefore, was motivated less by choice and more by necessity.

This directs attention to the importance ascribed to moving towards an online learning environment by an institution. There is no denying the fact that technology has helped increase access to education for those who have restricted mobility due to various reasons. At the same time, tertiary institutions need to recognise that those who are enrolling in online courses are doing so because their circumstances might not allow them to attend classes in a physical classroom (Choi, Lee, Jung & Letchem, 2013; Lee, 2017; Sáiz, 2013). This means that courses need to be designed by considering these special needs. Also, to get lecturers to put in the required effort in these online courses, universities need to have the right incentives in place. This not only means financial incentives for making the effort required to design courses aligned with the online space, but also that while drafting policies for moving to the online space, universities need to take into consideration the voice and opinion of the educators and students (Nobel, 1998) who will be making use of the online space.

Conclusion 3: Alternative to dialogic pedagogy

Being mindful of the inherent differences in online and physical classrooms, my participants had expected to have inadequate interaction amongst the students in the online space provided for dialogue. Therefore, each had found alternate ways to engage with the students: Dianne made use of Mahara, Molly uploaded videos of herself talking about concepts that were fairly complex to understand, and Henry uploaded videos of his in-class sessions of the same paper he was teaching in a physical classroom. All three are ways to make the online sessions more interactive, so that the students could critically analyse what they were learning. At first glance, these appear as attempts made by them to steer online education away from resembling a banking education (Freire, 1993). On deeper inspection, however, I feel that these were merely their own unique ways of using technology more engagingly. For instance, although Henry was uploading videos of his in-class lectures, he was not initiating any dialogue with his students himself except merely answering their queries via email. Similarly, Dianne's use of Mahara allowed her to cross-check if her students were alert in class and during practicum, and also if they were reading the suggested course material, but it did not necessarily encourage her students to reflect on their learning themselves.

Recognising these differences also makes it worth considering if the notion of dialogic pedagogy can really be extended to the online teaching and learning environment. My participants talked about not being able to develop relationships with their students in the online

environment. They considered dialogue with their students as indispensable to be able to develop these relationships. Nonetheless, being critically reflective practitioners, they were prepared for the absence of dialogue and had developed alternate ways of engaging. This again brings me back to considering that being a critically reflective practitioner requires experience, and depends on how open a practitioner is to adopting the range of pedagogical tools that have been made available through technology.

Implications

This study reinforces a view that adopting dialogic pedagogy is challenging for online educators. Dialogue allows teachers and students to develop a relationship with each other, which allows them to understand each other's perspectives. The conclusions arrived at by this research, therefore, imply that there is a need to find alternate ways to develop relationships among the teachers and their students, and even among the students themselves, in the online learning environment. The conclusions also point to the role that the management of the institution can play to ensure that making use of the online space is not merely a "tick-in-the-box" (Molly) because "that is where the world is headed towards" (Henry). On the contrary, making use of the online space should provide opportunities to the disadvantaged so that they can get the maximum benefit out of it.

Another implication emerging from this study is the need to develop backward linkages of tertiary education with secondary education with regards to teaching students how to interact in an online learning environment. From the beginning of 2018, digital technologies has been considered as a part of the Technology learning area in the New Zealand Curriculum (The New Zealand Curriculum Online, 2017). As a result, learning in digital technologies is now linked to learning across all learning areas. The goal of this change is to provide an opportunity to all learners to become digitally capable individuals. It is expected that all schools will be able to fully integrate this revised learning area into their curriculum by the start of 2020 school year. Although the focus of this change is on teaching students how to design new products, software, systems and tools, it also teaches students to take into account the impact of their innovations on cultural, ethical, environmental and economic conditions (The New Zealand Curriculum Online, 2017). Keeping this in mind, if students are guided from a young age about "netiquette", the etiquette of interacting in a network (Clouder et. al, 2011) this could contribute to fostering healthier dialogue in the online space in tertiary education as well.

Contributions made by this research

There is no paucity of studies analysing online education from various angles. There have been several studies that consider the advantages of delayed dialogue through a discussion forum. These studies discuss how written dialogue allows students to critically reflect upon it retrospectively because it is documented (Hew & Cheung, 2012; Osborne, Byrne, Massey & Johnston, 2018; Vess, 2005). At the same time, there are studies that favour synchronous online courses over asynchronous online courses (Anderson & Wdowik, 2014; Arasaratnam-Smith & Northcote, 2017), and also studies that recommend blending both forms of discussions (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014). No matter what aspect is selected to investigate, most previous studies are based on the experiences of the students, discussing factors such as their sense of isolation (Gauvreau, Hurst, Cleveland-Innes, & Hawranik, 2016; Motteram & Forrester, 2005), information overload and lack of previous knowledge related to the subject (Jamieson, 2015), amongst others. By focusing on the experiences of the educators, this study presents an alternate point of view to consider while designing online courses.

Limitations of the research

Every phenomenological study recognises that the findings are specific to the experiences of the participants. In line with this, although the results of my study may not be generalisable, they do offer insights to institutions that are new to offering options to learn online. The support these institutions provide to their lecturers may play a crucial role in the relationships that they will be able to develop with their students, and therefore influence learning outcomes.

While conducting a post-intentional phenomenological study, Vagle (2016) suggests that the researcher have a post-reflection plan, and record thoughts about how the data being gathered is related to the researchers own experiences about the phenomenon. Owing to time limitations, my post-reflection plan spanned approximately three months. Since I was also collecting data during this time, and there was a lapse of two months between the first and second interview of each participant, this left me with only a month to think about the participants' experiences retrospectively, and relate them to my own experiences. Since post-intentional phenomenology allows for 'lines of flight' that a phenomenon might take, having more time may have allowed me to develop an even deeper interpretation of the experiences of my participants.

Scheduling interviews with busy professionals can be challenging. What was even more challenging was to get them to agree to write a reflection of their pedagogical journey on a fortnightly basis. Although two of my participants completed this task responsibly, one of them did not. In order to make up for this, he agreed to talk to me for a longer time during the second interview. He also shared emails exchanged between him and his students with me, and talked me through the issues being discussed in those.

Finally, this study may have provided richer insights if the perspective of the students had also been documented by gathering data from them. This could have been done simultaneously while I was gathering data from the teachers. Executing such a study, however, would have required much more time to plan. Also, this would have yielded a much larger body of data, and given that the duration of my degree was only one year, a rigorous analysis of all this data might not have been possible.

Further research

While the conclusions that this research led me to are meaningful by themselves, they also open up further possibilities to explore. In particular, if having experience in a conventional, face-to-face teaching and learning environment is crucial for educators to be critically reflective, then would teachers who start their professional journey by teaching in the online environment be less able to critically reflect on their pedagogical approaches? Would the limited dialogue of the online environment make it difficult for them to develop relationships with their students, and therefore render online education to resemble what Freire's notion of a banking model of education rather than problem-posing education? Further research by recruiting participants who have begun their teaching careers by teaching online as opposed to teaching in a face-to-face environment could help to answer these questions.

Further, when I started this research, I did not expect to reach any conclusions about institutional practices. The experiences of my participants revealed otherwise: teaching practice cannot be separated from institutional practice. Therefore, the role of the university in providing support to online educators is another avenue to explore. Universities are known to have workshops for lecturers who are new to venturing into online education; management also provides technical support and tries to have the right financial incentives in place; what is needed most, however, is to explore how universities can make the move to the online

environment more inclusive, so that the lecturers and students feel that their voices are being heard. Further research around how online learning that is designed by incorporating the voice of the educators is different from that designed otherwise, could lead to insightful findings.

Final thoughts

In the preface to this study, I talked about students who I was teaching in a blended learning environment. I recall those students being more vocal about their dissatisfaction with learning in an online teaching and learning environment with me (and with the management of the institution), rather than voicing their concerns to those teachers themselves. As I reconcile the experiences shared by my participants with my own experiences, I now understand that the *relationships* that I was able to develop with my students simply did not exist between them and their external tutor based in the United Kingdom. The missing link between them, perhaps, was dialogue.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Indicative questions for the interviews

Since the interviews will be semi-structured, the following only provides an indication of what broad questions will be asked:

First Interview:

1. Can you please share an outline of the paper or papers you will be teaching online this semester? Which of the paper learning outcomes do you intend to achieve during the first seven weeks?
2. How will you be assessing whether these learning outcomes have been achieved?
3. What platforms will you be using for dialogue (student-teacher and student-student) during the course (give examples)? How comfortable are you with using these? On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = not at all comfortable/10 = very comfortable).
4. How do you think online teaching is different from face to face teaching, if at all? In your answer, please consider the following dimensions:
 - a. Student engagement
 - b. Achievement of learning outcomes
5. How do you intend to overcome these differences while you will be teaching this course online?
6. What do you understand by critical reflection? What does it mean to you to be a critically reflective teacher?
7. In what ways are teachers in the 21st century challenged to be reflective?
8. How have each of the following influenced how you critically reflect upon your teaching?
 - a. Personal experiences
 - b. Students learning experience
 - c. Knowledge of the cultural background of the students
 - d. Critical friends
 - e. Educational theory
9. Can you share your experiences of when you critically reflected upon your professional practices (in a face to face learning environment), and how the reflective process may have led you to change your practice?
10. What are your strengths as a teacher? How are those strengths helpful for you in the online environment?

Second interview:

1. In your transition from a face to face to an online educator, what pedagogic transitions have you experienced?
 - a. What mental shifts have you been aware of having to make?
 - b. How did you reflect upon and react to these transitions?

2. How do you compare students' achievements of learning outcomes in a face to face and online environment for this paper? Is there any significant difference between the two?
3. Thinking of the quality of what students posted online, how satisfied are you by their use of the online opportunities for dialogue in this paper? Have you got screen shots of your dialogue with your students you would like to share and discuss?
4. In what ways did the students' use of online opportunities influence your reflective processes? Can we look at and discuss your reflective journal to explain your answer?
5. Were you able to gather multiple perspectives on how you were doing as a teacher during this particular course? What were your sources of information?
6. What type of questions about your own practice developed as a result of engaging in this on-going critical reflection throughout the course?
7. How did the experience of teaching in the virtual learning environment transform your own learning and teaching practices?

Appendix 2: Confidentiality agreement between researcher and transcriber



Confidentiality Agreement

For someone transcribing data, e.g. audio-tapes of interviews.

Project title: The critically reflective practice of online educators: Constructing a dialogic pedagogy in virtual learning environments.

Project Supervisor: Dr. Leon Benade

Researcher: Sana Farooq

- ☐ I understand that all the material I will be asked to transcribe is confidential.
- ☐ I understand that the contents of the tapes or recordings can only be discussed with the researchers.
- ☐ I will not keep any copies of the transcripts nor allow third parties access to them.

Transcriber's signature:

Transcriber's name:

Transcriber's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....
.....
.....
.....

Date:

Project Supervisor's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....
.....
.....
.....

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on June 05, 2018, AUTEK Reference number 18/223

Note: The Transcriber should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix 3: Guidelines for writing reflective journals

Guidelines for maintaining and documenting evidence for reflective journals.

What is Reflection?

Reflection involves examining the evidence that supports a conclusion, and the links that connect the evidence to a conclusion, in a logical and systematic way. This allows a critical thinker to produce statements and assertions that are supported by both sound evidence and reasoning. But by itself, reflection is not necessarily critical. *Critical reflection* requires that you place your teaching and learning experiences into broader historical, social, and political contexts, and that you think about how to make meaningful, positive, and substantial differences to the lives of your students.

What is a Reflective Journal?

A reflective journal is an account of your work in progress (in your case, what you have taught during a two week time frame). It should be “a space to wonder, question, think, contradict yourself, agree with yourself, vent, scream, laugh, and celebrate” (Vagle, 2018, p. 174)¹. Essentially, it is an opportunity for you to ponder over your experience of teaching online, providing critical and analytical engagement with your paper, based on the dialogue that goes on between you and your students. This dialogue may be on discussion forums, blogs, or even over emails you exchange with them. Your reflections should also consider your experience of working with these online technologies.

What does a reflective journal look like?

Your reflective journal can be handwritten or electronic. Please consider the following:

1. Write in the first person.
2. Provide some context to ‘locate’ the entry.
3. Critically reflect on important aspects of dialogue, thinking over why dialogue may have taken the course that it has, and how it could have been avoided or encouraged (depending upon the situation).

Documenting evidence for your reflective journal:


You can make your journals more engaging by documenting evidence of dialogue between you and your students that made you stop and think over your pedagogic practice in the online context. For the purpose of this research, it will help if you take screen shots to document evidence of instances that highlight the depth of dialogue you attained with your students.

Protocols for taking screen shots:

During the first half of the semester, every time you encounter a situation in your online class where you feel students are engaging in meaningful dialogue with each other or with you, please take a screen shot of it. Similarly, you can also take screen shots of instances where you feel an absence of the development of meaningful dialogue. These screenshots will be discussed in the second interview. As part of the research process, it is essential to protect the privacy of your students. Therefore, when you take screenshots, please mask/erase the names, student ID's, email address, profile picture, or any other identity of your students, using the editing tools available in all picture-displaying software.

¹ Vagle, M. D. (2018). *Crafting phenomenological research* (2nd ed.). Milton, United Kingdom: Routledge.

Appendix 4: Approval for ethics application



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

Auckland University of Technology
D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316
E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

5 June 2018

Leon Benade
Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Leon

Ethics Application:18/223 The critically reflective practice of online educators: Constructing a dialogic pedagogy in virtual learning environments.

I wish to formally advise you that a subcommittee of the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) has approved your ethics application.

This approval is for three years, expiring 5 June 2021.

Non-Standard Conditions of Approval

1. Provision of an option in the Information Sheet for participants to review and correct the interview transcripts;
2. Provision of advice in the Information Sheet that the level of confidentiality that can be offered may be low when the pool of eligible staff is small.

Non-standard conditions must be completed before commencing your study. Non-standard conditions do not need to be submitted to or reviewed by AUTEC before commencing your study.

Standard Conditions of Approval


1. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using form EA2, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>.
2. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using form EA3, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form: <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>.
4. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
5. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. If you require management approval for access for your research from another institution or organisation then you are responsible for obtaining it. You are reminded that it is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz

Yours sincerely,



Kate O'Connor
Executive Manager
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: janaferooq2004@gmail.com

Appendix 5: Email sent to the School of Education

Dear Lecturers,

Sana Farooq, an M.Phil candidate in the School of Education, is inviting lecturers who will be teaching Year 1 and/or Year 3 of the B.Ed. degree in the semester commencing in July, 2018 to participate in her research.

Details about her research are available in the Information Sheet attached with this email. The research focuses on your online experience with your B.Ed. students, in particular, how dialogue in the online environment helps to shape your critical reflections on your pedagogy.


If you agree to participate, there will be two interviews (approximately 1 to 1.5 hours each). These interviews will be held in your office, at a time convenient for you. In addition to this, you will also write short reflective journals on a fortnightly basis. Participants will receive detailed guidelines concerning these journals and other evidence.

The reflective journals and evidence can also be used by participants towards their personal professional portfolios to be used when renewing their Teaching Practising Certificates.

The identity of those who agree to participate will remain confidential, and consent forms will be stored at the Post Graduate Office, and not in the School of Education.

To participate, please reply within the next two weeks, to sanafarooq2004@gmail.com with the attached Consent Form signed. Alternately, Sana will collect it from you when you meet for the first interview.

Appendix 6: Participant information sheet

|  | | |
|---|--------------|--|
| Participant Information Sheet | | |
| Date Information Sheet Produced: 24 – 05 – 2018 | | |
| Project Title The critically reflective practice of online educators: Constructing a dialogic pedagogy in virtual learning environments. | | |
| An Invitation I am Sana Farooq, a M.Phil (Education) student in the School of Education, Faculty of Culture and Society of the Auckland University of Technology. I would like to invite you to participate in the research I am conducting towards completing my thesis work. The virtual learning environment offers numerous economic and social benefits, and technology has helped bring distance learning a long way from where it started more than a century ago. Despite these advancements, it does not offer the same promptness of dialogue that is offered in a face-to-face learning environment. In this qualitative project, I am studying the dialogue between student and teacher in the virtual learning environment, to decipher how teachers of online courses construct their notions of critical reflection in order to improve their course content, teaching methodology and ways of assessment. | | |
| What is the purpose of this research? The virtual learning environment is a significant departure from the traditional learning contexts. Online educators do not simply have to adapt themselves to using technology more effectively to teach, but they also have to complement this with a change in their pedagogy and make use of platforms such as blogs and discussion boards. The challenges of the virtual learning environment include time lags in communication through discussion boards, blogs and even over email. How online educators overcome these challenges deserves further investigation. This study aims to investigate how teachers of online courses overcome these challenges, what notions of critical reflection they develop during this process, and what implications this has on their professional practice. | | |
| How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research? You have been invited to participate in this study because in the semester commencing July, 2018, you will be teaching in a blended learning environment, providing a certain number of contact hours with your students online. Participants should be teaching either Year 1 or Year 3 (or both) of the B.Ed degree, meaning you will have seven continuous weeks of classes with your students (week 1 to week 7 of the semester), before Teaching Practice. | | |
| How do I agree to participate in this research? You will need to sign a Consent Form if you agree to participate in this research. If you agree to participate, please send a signed copy of the consent form to sanafarooq2004@gmail.com, indicating that you are willing to be a part of this study. | | |
| What will happen in this research? If you agree to participate in this research, you will go through two rounds of interviews – one before the start of the semester and one after week 7. The first interview will discuss what you expect your students to learn during this course and will involve a detailed discussion of the course outline to find out what tools you will be using to engage your students in discussions during the online sessions of the course, and what learning outcomes you intend to achieve by the end of week 7. After week 7, you will be interviewed again to discuss whether you were able to achieve your intended outcomes, what strategies worked and which ones did not. You will also be asked to critically reflect on notions of dialogic pedagogy in an online environment. Each interview should last no more than one and a half hour. During the semester, you will also be asked to maintain a reflective journal, writing entries on a fortnightly basis (at the end of week 1, 3, 5 and 7). These journals will also focus on the nature of the dialogical relationship between | | |
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you and your students, to consider differences from what may have been in a traditional classroom, and to monitor changes as the course progresses. Writing these should take no more than 30 minutes every two weeks. You can also supplement these journals with screenshots you take of dialogue between you and your students, where comments/questions by the students may have encouraged you to critically reflect upon your pedagogical tools.

What are the discomforts and risks?

You will be asked to explore what it is like to be an online educator, in terms of how you critically reflect upon your lived professional experiences with your students, with a focus being on the depth of dialogue and how that may have an impact on student engagement. It is not envisaged that this process will cause discomfort; rather, it is hoped you may find this process professionally rewarding. As my primary supervisor works in the School of Education at AUT, you may think your reflections or interview comments will be seen by him, however we have put measures in place to alleviate this potential risk.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

Your consent form (if you agree to participate) will not be shared with my supervisor, instead, it will be placed in a sealed envelope and stored in a locked cupboard at the postgraduate office. Thus, my primary supervisor will not know who has volunteered to be part of this study. I will ensure all data will be anonymised, so he will not know the source of reflections or comments. Additionally, he is not in a line management role, thus further negating potential risk. No part of your reflections or interview comments will be shared with others.

Please be aware that your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at a later stage. At any stage of the interview, if you are uncomfortable with the direction in which the interview is heading, or wish to go 'off the record', you can ask for the digital recorder to be turned off.

How will my privacy be protected?

As noted, I will be the only person to know who has volunteered. A sub-contracted transcriber will transcribe the audio recordings. This person will assign pseudonyms to the voices, which will ensure that your names do not appear in the text. Your views will also be kept strictly confidential, and will not be reported to any other party. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used, but once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible. If actual excerpts from the interview or reflective journals are used, they will be done by attaching a pseudonym to you.

Despite all this, please be advised that when the pool of eligible staff is small, as is the case for the SOE at AUT, the level of confidentiality that can be offered may be low. As the researcher, I will try my utmost to offer as much confidentiality as is possible, by ensuring that all views expressed in during the interviews are kept anonymous.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

I recognise that you are a busy professional, so I will be sure to schedule interviews at times that are convenient for you. Each interview will last from one to one and a half hour. Maintaining the reflective journal will take approximately 30 minutes each time. You will be required to write critical reflections of your pedagogic approaches after week 1, 3, 5 and 7 of the semester.

What are the benefits?

As a participant, you will find the process of sharing your experiences to be engaging and thought provoking. Your contributions will be useful for formulating perspectives regarding learner engagement and dialogic stimulation in a virtual learning environment and suggest ways to encourage a critical understanding of concepts among students enrolled in online courses. These will be published in academic journals, and also presented at various conferences.

For me, this study will be pivotal for earning the M.Phil qualification, and also stimulate more ideas for future research in this area.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

Please send an email to sanafarooq2004@gmail.com within 2 weeks of receiving this invitation, indicating whether you agree to participate in this research.



TE WĀNANGA ARONUI
O TĀMAKI MAKĀU RAU

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

You will be provided transcripts to verify that your voice has been correctly recorded. This will allow you to review and correct the transcripts, if needed. The results of this research will be presented as a thesis. Additionally, it is hoped that the results will be presented as conference papers and also as published articles.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, *Dr. Leon Benade*, lbenade@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 ext 7931

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTC, Kate O'Connor, ethics@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Sana Farooq

Email: sanafarooq2004@gmail.com

Phone number: 022-499 5086

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr. Leon Benade

Email: leon.w.benade@aut.ac.nz

Phone number: 921 9999 ext 7931

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on June 05, 2018, AUTC Reference number 18/223.

Appendix 7: Consent form



Consent Form

Project title: The critically reflective practice of online educators: Constructing a dialogic pedagogy in virtual learning environments.

Project Supervisor: Dr. Leon Benade

Researcher: Sana Farooq

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated dd mmmm yyyy.
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ☐ I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- ☐ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ☐ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research.
- ☐ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

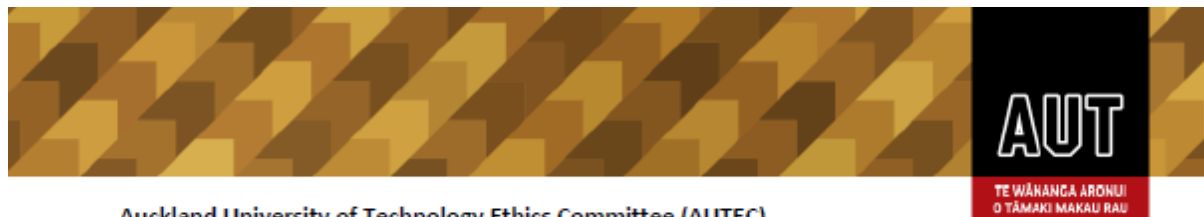
.....
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.....
.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on June 05, 2018, AUTEK Reference number 18/223

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix 8: Approval for amendment to AUTECH application



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTECH)

Auckland University of Technology
D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316
E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

21 August 2018

Leon Benade

Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Leon

Re: Ethics Application: 18/223 The critically reflective practice of online educators:
Constructing a dialogic pedagogy in virtual learning environments.

Thank you for your request for approval of an amendment to your ethics application.

The minor amendment to inclusion criteria (recruitment of lecturers from other universities) is approved.

I remind you of the Standard Conditions of Approval.

1. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using form EA2, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>.
2. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using form EA3, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTECH prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form: <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>.
4. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTECH Secretariat as a matter of priority.
5. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTECH Secretariat as a matter of priority.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

AUTECH grants ethical approval only. If you require management approval for access for your research from another institution or organisation then you are responsible for obtaining it. If the research is undertaken outside New Zealand, you need to meet all locality legal and ethical obligations and requirements.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz

Yours sincerely,

Kate O'Connor

Executive Manager

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: sanafarooq2004@gmail.com

Appendix 9: Email sent to recruit participants across Waikato

Dear _____,

I am Sana Farooq, an M.Phil candidate in the School of Education at the Auckland University of Technology. I would like to invite you to participate in research I am conducting, which will focus on your online teaching experiences.

Details about my research are available in the Information Sheet attached with this email. The research focuses on your online experience with your students, and, in particular, how dialogue in the online environment helps to shape your critical reflections on your pedagogy.

If you agree to participate, there will be two interviews (approximately 1 hour each). These interviews will be held in your office, at a time convenient to you. In addition to this, you will also write short reflective logs on a fortnightly basis. Participants will receive detailed guidelines.

The reflective journals and evidence can also be used by participants towards their personal professional portfolios to be used when renewing their Teaching Practising Certificates.

The identity of those who agree to participate will remain confidential, and consent forms will be stored at the Post Graduate Office, and not in the School of Education.

To participate, please reply within two weeks to sanafarooq2004@gmail.com with the attached Consent Form signed. Alternately, I can collect it from you when you meet for the first interview.

I look forward to getting a positive response from you.

Kind Regards,

Sana Farooq.