CHAPTER 4

Pivots, Provocateurs and Wallflowers: Postgraduate Students' Diverse Roles in Generating Dialogic Online Forum Discussions

Belinda Mendelowitz
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/000-0003-1915-2154

Ilse Fouche
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4562-4944

Yvonne Reed
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6157-3449

Grant Andrews
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5268-0800

Fatima Vally Essa
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3255-7199

Abstract

The concept of agency features with increasing prominence in academic discourse, particularly within the field of literacy education. This concept is highly relevant to research which focuses on students who are beginning their postgraduate journey and who need to make a shift from 'being' undergraduates to 'becoming' independent postgraduate students. Our concerns about enabling conditions of possibility for the development of student agency emerged strongly in 2020 when we switched from face-to-face to online teaching and learning. One specific concern was whether agentive and engaged dialogic learning could be facilitated in an online space. In attempting to address this concern we asked students in a Bachelor of Education Honours course to post,

in an online forum, their reflective responses to weekly readings and to each other's posts. This discussion forum became the engine of the students' course. In this chapter we analyse the forum posts of the 2020 and 2021 student cohorts, focusing specifically on how agency emerged in and from these forum interactions, and on the agency enacted in the various roles students played in their dialogic exchanges with peers and lecturers. We have termed these three roles: pivot, provocateur, and wallflower. We argue that the online discussion forums created 'the right to speak' (Norton 2013) and that the course requirement for all participants to speak created a rich learning environment in which students were exposed to, and gradually acquired, a range of voices. To conclude, we explore some implications of our findings for postgraduate curriculum design and pedagogy.

Keywords: Agency, postgraduate learning, online forums, dialogic learning, voice

1   Introduction

In April 2020, like many universities worldwide, the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa switched abruptly from contact teaching to emergency remote teaching (ERT). We were concerned about 'whether access to engaged dialogic learning could be facilitated' (Mendelowitz, Fouche, Reed, Andrews & Vally Essa 2022:21) in an asynchronous learning space for students in a B.Ed. Honours core course *Language and Literacy, Theories and Practices*. This is one of four modules, each taught for 14 weeks, which students need to complete to be awarded a B.Ed. Honours degree – the first level of postgraduate studies in South Africa. We agree with Samuel (2022:118) that postgraduate pedagogies should enable students 'to critique ritualistic research conventions and promote an independent, assertive academic voice' and thus we were also concerned about how to facilitate and support the development of our students' critical voices in this new teaching and learning environment. As explained in Mendelowitz *et al.* (2022:22), we made two decisions: '(i) to make online forum posts the new course engine; and (ii) to investigate possible affordances and limitations of these dialogic posts for student learning and for the development of critical scholarly voice'. Each week every student was required to post an individual response on our learning management platform (Ulwazi) to tasks

based on the course readings for that week and also to engage in a discussion of responses posted by at least two of their peers on this platform. In addition, for the first few weeks, course lecturers provided feedback to each student's individual post. Thereafter, global responses were given to students in weekly announcements (see Appendix A for further details). In a summative assignment, students reflected on their learning from both the readings and the forum discussions.

The research discussed here forms part of a larger Scholarship of Teaching and Learning project in which we investigate the impact of dialogic forum discussions on both undergraduate and postgraduate students' learning. This chapter focuses on how these forum discussions can be used to facilitate dialogic learning at postgraduate level. We began by analysing the 2021 B.Ed. Honours cohort's online discussion forums in the *Language and Literacy, Theories and Practices* course, in terms of the role of dialogic interaction in developing personal, professional and scholarly voices which can contribute to increased epistemic access (Mendelowitz *et al.* 2022). In this chapter, we consider how the agency evident in the 2020 and 2021 students' discussion forum posts manifested in the various roles they played in responding to course readings and in interacting with peers and lecturers. We also reflect on how playing these roles contributed to the development of a range of voices, including critical, questioning voices.

2   Agency, Investment and Dialogism in Postgraduate Learning

The concepts of agency and investment are integral to our understanding of how students chose to interact and present themselves in an online dialogic pedagogic space. Drawing on Freire, we conceptualise a dialogic pedagogy as one that entails 'multiple dynamic interactions with the self, with others and with texts and cultural resources' (Mendelowitz, Ferreira & Dixon 2023:54). We conceptualise such a pedagogy as having four key elements: engagement with audience, reflexivity, multivoicedness and engagement with texts and cultural resources (Mendelowitz *et al.* 2022). Reflexivity entails dialogues with the self and we are particularly interested in how this 'inner conversation' (Bradbury 2020: 23) is reshaped by dialogue with others and with textual/ cultural resources. We argue that these multiple layers of dialogic pedagogy

enabled students to become agentive and invested learners along a continuum of engagement, in varied ways and to different degrees.

Despite the wealth of recent conceptualisations of agency (Stenalt & Lassesen 2022), we find most useful Emirbayer and Mische's (1998:962) conception of agency as:

> a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its 'iterational' or habitual aspect) but also oriented toward the future (as a 'projective' capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a 'practical-evaluative' capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment).

Within the context of higher education, we add to this a sense of students' purposefulness, influenced by their ability to draw on available resources to achieve personal learning goals. Norton's (1995, 1997 2013) work on identity and investment in language learning is of particular interest here. For the purposes of this chapter, we extend the concept of 'language learning' in Norton's work to include 'targeted course content' since our course is not aimed at teaching a specific language, but rather at helping students understand key concepts and practices within the field of language and literacy studies. Like Emirbayer and Miche (1998), Darvin and Norton (2017) take into consideration students' 'projective capacity' by focusing on students' agentive imaginings of future identities.

Drawing on the above concepts, we take the position that the students in our study had to (re)define themselves within a temporary online space, starting from positions of past pedagogic and social identities and making purposeful choices about their investment in the course through actions and interactions (cf. Case 2015) aimed at achieving imagined future identities. In some cases, these choices shifted as students journeyed through the course.

We consider agency through the social realist lens offered by Archer's (1995 2000) morphogenetic approach which has been viewed as productive for reflecting on student learning in higher education (Case 2015; Williams 2012). This approach considers agency as one of three spheres of social life, the other two being *structures* and *culture*. Structures relate to 'the world out there' (Case 2015:843) and include material goods such as resources, but also intangible structures such as social positions, course curricula and course requirements.

Social phenomena emerge not only as a result of these structures, but also as a result of the agents (people) who interact within these structures and the cultures that influence these interactions (including institutional cultures, disciplinary cultures and also national and regional cultures). According to Archer (1995), these spheres work together towards either *morphostasis* (thus, emergent properties that cause a phenomenon to remain the same), or *morphogenesis* (thus, emergent properties that enable change in a phenomenon).

Case (2015:843) argues that in 'the arena of higher education, we are centrally focused on the morphogenesis of student agency; we aim for students to leave higher education with different knowledge and capacity for action than that with which they entered'. In this chapter, we consider structural and agential morphogenesis (in this case, how student engagement and agency were enabled at least partly through the way in which the course's dialogic pedagogy was structured to facilitate not only the right to speak, but also the requirement to speak). Though structures, cultures and agency are 'intimately … intertwined' (Archer 1995:65), Archer argues that the emergent properties of these spheres can be analysed separately to better understand the phenomenon under investigation. It is this approach of *analytical dualism* that we follow in this chapter.

In a discussion of student agency through a morphogenetic lens, Case (2015:841) calls for a 'true higher education' which facilitates 'the development of an enlarged sense of agency for students'. Archer's (2000) concept of the social actor is important in the interplay between students' actions and interactions. She argues that we become 'recognisable to others' as social actors, embodying certain roles, 'through the consistency of our personified conduct in our social positions' (Case 2015:12). Norton's conceptions of identity and investment resonate strongly with Archer's argument, as is evident in the suggestion that highly motivated students might 'resist opportunities to speak in contexts where [they are] positioned in unequal ways' (Darvin & Norton 2016:20). Hence teachers need to create inclusive, hospitable classroom environments that facilitate 'the right to speak' (Norton 2013:170). In addition, learners invest in learning if doing so increases 'the value of their cultural capital and social power' (Darvin & Norton 2016:20). Norton (1997:410) makes a link between identities and desire: 'the desire for **recognition**, the desire for **affiliation** and the desire for **security and safety**' influence how we enact our identities. Thus, the roles we play in learning contexts relate to what we believe we might achieve through our engagement in the learning process. These roles

can range from positioning ourselves as strong and competent academic voices demanding recognition, to positioning ourselves as partial spectators who listen in on other conversations, playing safe as we measure ourselves in relation to our peers and navigate our own personal and academic identity journeys within the learning context. In fact, Darvin and Norton (2017) acknowledge the strategic aspect of investment - students learn to play the game strategically. They argue, 'learners exercise agency by choosing what they perceive as beneficial to their existing or imagined identities, by consenting to or resisting hegemonic practices and by investing or divesting from the language and literacy practices of particular classrooms and communities' (Darvin & Norton 2017:7). We argue that our dialogic pedagogy, and the range of possibilities for student engagement with self, others and texts (including the right and requirement to speak), increased the possibilities of student investment in the course that is the focus of this chapter.

Archer (2000) points out that the conditions we find ourselves in are rarely entirely of our choosing. For example, the structural realities of our course, preceded and to a considerable extent dictated the social interactions of students within it. Students are involuntarily placed as *social agents* within pre-existing structural conditions, which affect 'the *social actors* whom some of us can voluntarily become' (Archer 2000:249). For Archer (2000:12), the types of social actors we might choose to become are 'subject to continuous internal review' - thus, at least to some extent, we position and define ourselves in roles we choose to take on and which in turn impact on our identities (cf. Norton Peirce 1995). In higher education, these roles are likely to be most effectively executed when there is 'a synthesis of personal identity in concert with social identity relating to being a student', with 'full agential morphogenesis' (Case 2015:849) a likely outcome. Actively encouraging this synthesis between the personal and social (including students' academic and professional persona) has been a conscious pedagogic aim of the Language and Literacies course since its inception twenty years ago.

3   Context and Pedagogy

In previous iterations of the course, we aimed to offer productive learning 'spaces' in small classes in which dialogic interactions were often generative. However, these discussions rarely included all students. Typically, confident students would participate while other students chose to listen, rarely contribut-

ing unless directly called upon by a lecturer. Furthermore, we realised that students sometimes came to classes without having read the prescribed articles, therefore being underprepared for engaging in conversations based on these texts. In moving to online learning, we were concerned about how this move would influence the levels of investment previously evident in the engaged dialogic learning of some students, and about the likelihood of students' investment in the course decreasing. In responding to the enforced structural change to online teaching and learning, as part of our curriculum strategy, we chose to integrate new requirements into the structure of the course as explained in the course outline extract below:

> The weekly reading responses that you are required to do are an essential part of your learning. This is the engine of the course and will culminate in a summative reading response assignment in which you will pull together your insights gained from the weekly reading responses (Course Outline 2020 and 2021).

In the light of these structural changes, in this chapter, we describe and discuss how students signalled their investment by positioning themselves, in the roles they took on, to work toward a synthesis between their personal and social identities (cf. Case 2015).

4 Methodology

With the rapid and unplanned switch to ERT in 2020, we planned as carefully as we could for teaching and learning in new ways, relying heavily on the discussion forums that took the place of weekly face-to-face discussions. When, towards the end of that year, we realised how unexpectedly rich and diverse students' interactions on these forums were, we decided that we needed to understand why this was the case and to integrate the affordances of discussion forums more purposefully into future iterations of the course. Then, at the conclusion of the course, informed consent was requested from students in the 2020 and 2021 cohorts for anonymously analysing their discussion forum and summative reading response assignment submissions (hereafter referred to as the summative assignment); data was only analysed after this consent was obtained. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the identities of our students.

Students' written work (their discussion forum responses as well as their reading response assignment) was analysed using critical discourse analysis, which 'explores the connections between the use of language and the social and political contexts in which it occurs …. It also investigates ways in which language constructs and is constructed by social relationships' (Paltridge 2012). Fairclough (2003) argues that discourse analysis is particularly useful for understanding 'the discoursal aspect of ways of being, identities', and focuses on the process of identification that humans go through which, in writing, manifests as a 'textual process'. Considering identification as a process also points to a key argument of this chapter, that identities are not fixed, and that different roles can be taken on, sometimes over time, and sometimes concurrently. However, Fairclough (2003) warns that 'identification is not a purely textual process, not only a matter of language'. Thus, in our analysis, we refrain from directly commenting on students' identities as emerging from their written discourse, but rather consider roles they take on in this textual process of identification.

After a careful reading of the posts and the assignments we met to discuss what had emerged for each of us about the roles students 'performed' and possible reasons for these choices of roles. In our analysis, we focused on how discourse manifested in the online discussion forums; this included conversation analysis (Paulus, Warren & Lester 2016) which we applied to text-based conversations (focusing on the interactions between people in conversation, considering who spoke, who was silent, who responded to whom, and the sequence in which students responded), as well as text structure and language use. Through our analysis, we identified three fairly distinct roles, with some students playing more than one role across their various forum posts and have termed the three **pivot, provocateur** and **wallflower.**

The students whom we consider to be **pivots** played a key role in engaging other students by affirming their contributions and by drawing them into discussion with one another through their nuanced responses to both the readings and to what their peers had posted. They often performed a bridge-building role as both knowledge builders and interpersonal relationship builders, playing a synthesising role. From varied definitions and examples of **provocateurs** in action in a range of contexts, we have compiled the following general definition: one who incites or stimulates another to action, including the action of critical thinking; in education one function of a provocateur is to ask thought-provoking questions that encourage perspective shifts. In the context of

our data, the provocateurs push boundaries and sometimes serve as role models of confident, compelling and critical academic engagement. When applied to a person rather than a plant, a **wallflower** usually refers to someone who remains on the fringes of a social occasion such as a dance. We chose the descriptor 'wallflower' for students who remained on the margins for much or all of the course – whether confidently self-contained or lacking initial confidence to engage with others, seemingly uninterested in such engagement or, particularly in 2020, because of contextual constraints.

Having identified these roles, we undertook a textual analysis of students' forum posts and summative assignments with the aim of understanding how students enacted agency through the roles they assumed in the online forum space. Our analysis was informed by the theorisations of agency and investment outlined above.

5 Pivots, Provocateurs and Wallflowers

In this section, we analyse the agentive positions evident in the discussion forum posts of selected students in the 2020 and 2021 student cohorts, using the roles of pivot, provocateur and wallflower to frame the analysis. However, for the role of provocateur, we only include an example from the 2021 cohort, because the student from the 2020 cohort who most strongly emerged as provocateur did not give informed consent for her responses to be included in this study. Direct quotations are indicated verbatim in italics. We use bold formatting to highlight words or sections for the reader.

5.1 Pivots
Anathi (2020)

In 2020, Anathi played the role of a pivot from Week 1 to Week 7, and of wallflower in the last few weeks of the course. In this section, we focus on her role as a pivot - a role that was enabling for other students in two ways. Firstly, in her individual posts, she models ways of writing that show the blending of high personal and affective engagement, critical self-reflexivity and intellectual engagement. These ways of writing, thinking, knowing and being are taken up, often with acknowledgement to her, by other students. Secondly, in responding to other students' posts she first affirms aspects of the content of these posts before moving to suggestions for alternative ways of responding. These

responses to her peers are similar in format to the 'praise-question-encourage' model advocated in the assessment literature as a support and confidence builder for students (Lipp & Davis-Ockey 1997).

Week 1 of the course focused on conceptualisations of language and literacies. Since 1994, schooling in South Africa has been officially desegregated but the effects of apartheid structures linger. Anathi attended a school that had excluded black students during the Apartheid years and which, after 1994, continued to offer only English and Afrikaans as subjects, despite the admission of African language-speaking students. In her first reading response, she quotes teachers who made remarks such as *stop clowning, this is not a township school,* and *you can only speak Zulu in the township schools*. She concludes her introductory paragraph with the following:

> *These two articles have **opened my eyes** to understanding the negative attitude I have bared towards African languages as an African and my negative attitude towards township schools.*

In reflecting on languages of power and the power of languages Anathi uses the rhythms and repetition of oratory, reminiscent of Martin Luther King's (1963) *I have a dream* and Thabo Mbeki's (1996) *I am an African* speeches:

> *As mentioned in the articles, **for years** I have been naïve and English has been a priority language that I should master and not a foreign language that threatens the elevation of African languages. **For years** I too have been caught up in 'literate and illiterate binaries' where I have been taught that the inability to read and write specifically in the English language is illiteracy regardless of the ability to read and write in an African language. This is where even **I as an African became an oppressor** to my fellow African peers in Township schools where I would disassociate myself from those who struggled to communicate with me in English. Perhaps this is a reflection of the success of imperialism as stated in the Wa Thiongo article as the foreign language was successfully the 'means of spiritual subjugation'. I would rather have learned Afrikaans as an additional language than isiXhosa (....) These articles bring about a call for action to **Africans such as myself** to liberate ourselves from false consciousness and **embrace our true African selves** even to the realms of our languages.*

In this first individual reading response, Anathi demonstrates that exposure to alternative conceptualisations of language and literacy in socio-cultural contexts, together with an invitation to respond in a range of voices – personal, professional and academic – *lifted the veil* for her. Throughout her responses, Anathi illustrates the personal and social synthesis that Case (2015) advocates. Her juxtaposition of her past (*for years I have been*) and present selves and ideas (*call for action to Africans such as myself*) illustrate her investment in the course and her agentive move towards an imagined future self (Emirbayer & Mische 1998) which embraces her activist African identity and its relation to new ideas about literacy and language.

Her passionate and critically self-reflexive writing provokes almost equally passionate responses from four of her peers, two of whom focus more on the personal aspects of her post and two on her initial exploration of her intellectual shift. The more personal responses begin in very similar ways by showing appreciation for her honesty. For these students the frankness of Anathi's post was pivotal in creating a safe space for critical self-reflection, as indicated in Sarah's response:

> *Hey Anathi, Firstly, thank you for **being so honest** about how you feel about township schools and suburban schools. It's not often you get to see **how students feel** about them (…). I **enjoyed** reading your response as it **made me realise** that there are normalities of language within our society, specific to the South African society, that I too have fallen in. **These normalities** are the very essence, as mentioned throughout your response, of the way in which we begin to value one language over another. The example of preferring the more classic stories of Red Riding Hood and dismissal of stories of your mother's past was an **experience that I can relate to** as well.* (Sarah)

Sarah's informal greeting suggests she felt comfortable from the start to engage with Anathi's response to the readings and to confess both her own normalising of English and her preference for Eurocentric fairy tales. The cluster of words in the extract signals Sarah's high level of affective engagement and how Anathi's role as a pivot opens the space for her peers. Sarah then begins to consider how to value local languages. Her affirmation of Anathi's response to the readings continues in Week 2 and is echoed by Na'ilah whose Week 2 response to Anathi is similar to Sarah's:

> *Hi Anathi. Your response really **has me thinking all over again**. I love how you **related the articles to your experiences** and it's in this discussion that I agree with Sarah in **rethinking my place of privilege**.* (Na'ilah)

Anathi reciprocally affirms aspects of Sarah's and Na'ilah's responses:

> *Sarah, I enjoyed reading your response (....) I'm glad **somebody spoke up** about being unable to relate to American readings and experiences, even though we are able to apply them to the South African context. I just think it would be more interesting to really engage with South African texts reflecting real South African issues, thank you for that.*

Anathi's comment that she's glad 'somebody spoke up' encapsulates the pivotal space she creates around her. She acknowledges the risk that Sarah has taken in an unthreatening way, thus opening the floor for her and others to continue speaking their minds. Anathi contributes to creating a forum environment that facilitates 'the right to speak' (Norton 2013:170). In responding to Na'ilah she comments:

> *Na'ilah, I enjoy responses **that are integrated with personal reflection** on experiences and reflection on how what you have read relates to you.*

Her response illustrates the pivotal role she played in supporting Na'ilah's shift from her initial reading response, which backgrounded the personal and experiential and foregrounded summaries of the readings, towards posts in which she continues to demonstrate understanding of the readings while including her own response to them. Na'ilah's final comment on the challenge of working with 'diverse forms of literacy' in the classroom as advocated in one of the readings illustrates the shifts she has made:

> *(…) it seems like an incredibly difficult task and one that would require a highly skilled teacher, something that I don't think I would be able to attempt as a teacher straight from varsity.*

In responding to Na'ilah, Anathi agrees that embracing the *difficult task* is a great challenge for newly qualified teachers. She then states the necessity of

doing so and ends on a note of encouragement to Na'ilah and to the whole student cohort of newly qualified teachers:

> *I think with **the right kind of attitude and resilience** it wouldn't take many years of experience to do so. Thank you for your lovely response.*

Anathi, Sarah, and Na'ilah continued to respond to each other's posts in the first half of the course, but in the second half, Anathi became so burdened by adverse personal circumstances – both structural and cultural - that she was unable to sustain a high level of engagement with either the course or her peers. At that point, she became a wallflower, posting only her individual responses to the readings.

By providing Sarah and Na'ilah with guidance for understanding the readings, models of ways of responding, and affirmation of their efforts to do so, Anathi, in her role as the 'synthesiser', had encouraged them to make tentative steps towards 'postgraduateness' (Samuel 2022:126). For example, in Week 7 Na'ilah wrote the following:

> *Hi Anathi. Again, I absolutely love reading your weekly responses. Your experiences show the validity and challenges that these articles highlight, while bringing it [them] to life in a way I would never have thought of.*

When Anathi became a wallflower, they too retreated, with Na'ilah posting only her individual responses and two further responses to peers and Sarah posting only her individual responses. We suggest that this retreat was to the detriment of their summative assignment.

Refilwe (2021)

Across all her individual posts, Refilwe illustrates a high level of reflexivity and engagement with key concepts and debates in relation to the readings. However, what is most striking is her agentive formulation of questions, and her dialogic engagement with texts, peers and lecturers in her quest to find answers. Refilwe does not embrace new concepts unquestioningly. She grapples with ideas and considers different perspectives. Thus, her responses are more nuanced, more questioning, and less authoritative than those of Siboniso, the provocateur, to

be discussed in the next section.

In Week 10 (multilingualism), Refilwe navigates different positions within the multilingualism debates, embracing recognition of learners' languages, language varieties, and identities but expressing concerns about the implications of this recognition for practical classroom implementation. In this moment, there seems to be a conflict between her postgraduate student identity and her teacher identity. She raises a number of important questions while modelling a tentative and unthreatening, emerging critical and scholarly voice to peers:

> *Because language is said to be fluid and everchanging, it is apt to fight for the recognition of township lingua **although I do not perceive it as something that is practical.** Sibanda challenges the idea that township lingua is deficit, granted, **but I still ask, how do we accommodate this lingua in a classroom environment.***

Refilwe poses six questions in Week 10, and these become more insistent as she writes, with each one structured as in the extract above: an acknowledgement of an idea supporting multilingualism (usually supported by a source) followed by a question. Her conclusion indicates that her position is still unresolved and in her summative assignment she comments on feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of multilingual education:

> *For a moment the topic on multilingualism seemed too complicated for me. I kept asking questions as to how practical it is for a multilingual country like South Africa to implement mother tongue education. I kept thinking that we are biting more than we can chew. (Refilwe, summative assignment)*

Refilwe's engagement across different parts of the forum is quite striking. She keeps the conversation going by participating consistently with a range of students and continues to ask thought-provoking questions that indicate both critical engagement and ambivalence about the issues raised in each week's theme, especially the theory/ practice divide. A significant part of her quest is to find theoretical answers that enable viable implementation within her own language classroom and in the wider society. Through this sustained engage-ment with her peers and the questions she asks of them and of the readings, she

enacts the role of a pivot in the forum. Interestingly, at times she also takes on the role of a provocateur through her use of critical and thought-provoking questions. At these times, she presents as a provocateur through insistent questioning, occasionally being quite confrontational.

This discussion of Refilwe's engagement in the forum illustrates that students do not restrict themselves to one specific role. While Refilwe's insistent questioning and her nuanced grappling with ideas mostly serve a pivotal role as shown in this section, towards the end of Week 10 she takes on the more confrontational style of a provocateur.

5.2   Provocateur
Siboniso (2021)
From the outset, Siboniso engages with the forum in a confident, authoritative voice, reflecting in detail on his intellectual shifts while engaging deeply with key theoretical concepts. He consistently plays the role of a provocateur, both in his individual reading response postings and in his participation in forum discussions. He began the course with a clear set of goals and pursued these goals throughout. In the discussion that follows, we illustrate his provocateur role in Week 10, which focused on multilingualism.

Siboniso's strong, scholarly voice is evident in the high modality of his discourse (Martin & Rose 2003) and in the confidence with which he expresses his ideas and refers to key sources. He enacts his agency assertively, demonstrating substantive moves towards 'full agential morphogenesis' (Case 2015:849) in his rapid and convincing take-up of new ideas. Related to this, he increasingly shows investment (Darvin & Norton 2015) in becoming an emerging scholar.

There are moments in his response that resonate powerfully with Case's (2015:12) argument that the types of social actors we might choose to become are 'subject to continuous internal review'. He consciously juxtaposes his previous beliefs with his new emerging beliefs in relation to the Week 10 readings. He begins by stating that: *This week's readings have **made me aware** of how widespread, misleading, and perverse the Western understanding of language and multiculturalism is*. He briefly problematises a traditional definition of multilingualism (Van der Walt & Dornbrack 2011) that does not foreground the fluidity of language boundaries and then he systematically shows how one course reading challenged a number of his assumptions and

beliefs about languages.

> *First, the article by McKinney and colleagues challenged me when I read that 'deconstructing the notions of stable, bounded languages can be read as a poststructuralist move' (2015: 104)…. After reading this article I was* **challenged** *and* **forced** *to acknowledge that I had* **succumbed** *to the stratified monoglossic orientations to language and never had I perceived language from a heteroglossic perspective.*

A striking element of this response is that Siboniso already positions himself as being part of an academic dialogue in which he embraces the challenges to problematise previous perspectives and engage with heteroglossic conceptualisations of language and multilingualism. He distances himself from his prior position acknowledging that he had *succumbed* to it - a verb striking in its foregrounding of this prior position as intellectually flawed. In engaging with and accepting new ideas, Siboniso displays the morphogenesis of his scholarly identity. Siboniso is excited by these new possibilities for thinking and being, yet simultaneously there is some discomfort as he writes about being *challenged and forced to acknowledge* the limitations of his previous position - not an easy process as his choice of the verb *forced* indicates. At the same time, Siboniso capitalises on the relatively safe and 'comfortable' space of the forum which encourages play with ideas and shifts in thinking.

In responding to a course reading on multilingualism and monoglossia, Siboniso highlights the practical implications of monoglossic orientations in multilingual classrooms and unpacks the problems of the term 'home language' when for many students the so-called home language used in schools is vastly different from the variety of language(s) they use at home. He concludes that*: In my view, this monoglossic language teaching and school home language selection undermines dialects and renders learners' spoken languages as null and void.* His strong conclusion is extended in his final sentence: *What lacks from the Western view of language is the acknowledgement of the ever changing, flexible and context specific nature of language which is very much acknowledged and highlighted in Sibanda's articles and Jamilla's TED talk.* In these two sentences, he pulls together two of the most important ideas raised in Week 10 and in the course as a whole, taking ownership of these ideas by using his own words and presenting his ideas as statements of indisputable fact.

Siboniso's post elicited five responses – amongst the highest number to

a single student in any week of the 2021 course. His careful selection of key issues and his positioning/ (re)positioning of himself with dexterity in relation to these issues, prepared the ground for some lively, high-quality discussion. The opening lines of each response show a strong endorsement of and alignment with Siboniso's new position and his process of rethinking his previous position. This is not surprising given the authoritative, confident presentation of his ideas. To some extent, other students' alignment with Siboniso's position illustrates Darvin and Norton's (2017:7) argument that 'learners exercise agency by choosing what they perceive as beneficial to their existing or imagined identities'.

Two students begin by juxtaposing their previously held ideas about multilingualism with the new ideas that have emerged from the readings and Siboniso's response. Elenor begins as follows: *Like you, Siboniso, I was unaware of the diverse nature of multilingualism in South Africa. ... **now I realized** that there are different versions of isiZulu and of all other African languages*. She then explores the implications of this diversity for the conceptualisation of mother tongue and picks up on Siboniso's interrogation of the dominant *western lens*.

Even more interestingly, Malik, who posted her response ahead of Siboniso's, makes a shift from her individual post, in response to Siboniso's comments on that post, as well as to his reading response. Malik initially conceptualised multilingualism in traditional ways but moved towards a more fluid conceptualisation that recognises its role as a *multi-faceted tool* in response to Siboniso's catalytic input:

> *I, too, held the conventional definition of multilingualism. ... Language is a multi-faceted tool that we have only begun to touch on and will never truly come to learn in its entirety.*

Another student, Alice, also begins with agreement: *I agree with your reasoning about differing home languages being taught in schools especially in the cases where students already speak about 3 to 4 other languages.* This introduction is followed by a thoughtful question about the impact of LoLT (Language of Learning and Teaching) on identity: *... However, if a child speaks many languages and is forced to undertake a 'main' language such as a Home Language, who does the child become? What is their identity?* Alice's question picks up on Siboniso's argument about the marginalisation of students' home

languages, dialects, and varieties. Finally, Refilwe ends the discussion by complimenting Siboniso on his use of references:

> *Hi again Siboniso. I must say, I love the energy and dedication you show in referencing. You always do it so well. Please share tips because that's my weakness*.

The rich discussion among the six students who interact with the thread highlights the role of the forum in students' learning, and the ways in which they learn from each other. What it shows most strongly is their developing sense of agency and how this emerges through dialogic, interdependent exchanges, explicit reflections on shifting ideas, and a range of 'textual' resources. In this instance, the main textual resource is Siboniso's reading response which models engaged and thoughtful academic practice. Refilwe's final comment encapsulates this. She is not only referring to the correct use of references in terms of citation conventions but also to his engagement with sources and his integration of these ideas into his discussion. For those who have not posted their individual reading response, there is a sense that they are 'warming up' to the task, and possibly even rehearsing the academic performance by engaging in this discussion – reflecting on their shifting ideas, stating their position, elaborating on ideas and raising questions.

Siboniso's role as provocateur also emerges from lecturers' positioning of him in their global feedback to students' responses. While we made a conscious effort to include examples from a range of students, Siboniso's input tends to be foregrounded with reference to both his high level of reflexivity, his confident pulling together of key ideas and the way he elicited responses from his peers. While one of the affordances of the online reading response was that students could read and learn from each other's responses, we also chose to foreground the most productive responses in our global responses each week in order to consolidate their learning from each other.

5.3 *Wallflowers*

Our analysis of the posts of students whom we term wallflowers revealed that these students may have chosen this role for contrasting reasons. Having already explained that Anathi became a wallflower so that she could meet the minimum requirements of the course, rather than drop out of the Honours degree, in this

section we focus on Frances from the 2020 cohort and Tholakele from 2021.

Frances (2020)

In her first individual forum response, Frances positions herself as an authoritative writer through aligning herself with extensive expert sources and her lexical and syntactic choices. Her opening paragraph concludes with the following:

> *Just as Dr X stated in the last few minutes of her lecture, language and literacy are interwoven – language is used as a tool in terms of literacy teaching; this is expanded by both Janks and Wa Thiong'o in terms of literacy, language and more specifically what resonates with me, the aspect of power.*

She chooses verb forms that convey certainty, or high modality (Martin & Rose 2003): *language and literacy <u>are</u> interwoven ... language <u>is used</u> as tool ... this <u>is expanded</u>*. While she asks some critical questions and makes some insightful observations, she also indicates that she values the authority of those she perceives to be experts: *as Dr X stated* and *this is expanded by both Janks and Wa Thiong'o.*

Although Frances responded enthusiastically to two of her peers in Weeks 1 and 2, in Week 3 she posted that she was feeling *almost overwhelmed* by the on-going demands of ERT. As a result, she appears to have made a strategic choice to 'stick with the experts'. Ironically, making this decision may have been influenced by the praise she received from the peers who responded to her initial individual posts: they enjoyed the clarity of her writing and the links she made to her own experiences, and agreed with her responses to key concepts discussed in the readings – for example, *I agree with you on the role power plays in language and how that then affects literacy* (Na'ilah). Her fellow students affirmed her as a competent reader and writer of academic texts.

In the summative assignment, based on the weekly reading responses, Frances scored the highest mark in her cohort. In this assignment her reflections include several examples of her responsiveness to lecturers:

> *Feedback provided by Dr [X] opened the doors to a concept I now find incredibly important for access to language and literacy learning – translanguaging.*

> *With the feedback gained from Dr [Y], I felt more confident in questioning the identities and the identity construction of those around me ….*
> *I was still undergoing what Dr Y referred to as 'the heart and head tussle' ….*

In this assignment, Frances chose the metaphor of the life cycle of a butterfly to illustrate her 'journey' through the course. To mix metaphors, choosing to be a wallflower appears to have been enabling for aspects of Frances's journey from caterpillar to individual butterfly. She left the course with more and different kinds of knowledge than she entered (Case 2015). She had capacity for individual action from the start and in several of her posts wrote about how new understandings from the course were influencing changes to her classroom pedagogy. However, after the first two weeks she was not responsive to either the personal-experiential or academic-critical voices of her peers, making no direct reference to any of these in her assignment, although it is possible that she engaged silently with their ideas. By choosing not to become a social butterfly it could be argued that Frances exemplifies what Darvin and Norton (2016:33) write about language learners:

> Because of the fluidity with which learners can move in and out of diverse spaces, they attain greater agency to not just engage but also disengage from others, to invest in and disinvest from shared practices, and to seek or shun a collective endeavour.

Frances chose to disengage from her peers while investing in the ideas of those she considered 'experts'. It is hard to know what to make of her wallflower mode of learning in terms of agency and the development of critical questioning voices. Perhaps the choices she made illustrate the flexible affordances of online learning for individuals, even if such choices may be more positive for the individual than for fellow students who could have benefited from exchanging ideas with a student such as Frances.

Tholakele (2021)

Conventional descriptions of social wallflowers tend to include shyness or lack of confidence as defining characteristics, and this seems to have been the case

for Tholakele. Initially, her choice was to see how others 'performed', by first responding to the posts of selected peers and finally to post her individual response. Her early responses to peers began with affirmation, as in these examples from Week 2: *Unpalatable truth right there, the manner in which language is taught should be looked into as it may affect learners negatively*, and *Very interesting points and claims highlighted in your response*. Later in one post, she introduces a very elementary critical voice, not towards students or texts, but towards education curricula - potentially a structure which is socially more acceptable and 'safer' (cf. Norton: 1997) to critique.

In her individual Week 2 reading response, Tholakele offers a very good summary of pertinent points from all three readings but there is no indication of how the ideas raised in these articles relate to her own lived experiences, or whether they have impacted her own thinking. She relies heavily on direct quotations, with occasional signals that she agrees with the points raised. At times, there is evidence of ability to relate articles to each other, but her own scholarly voice remains backgrounded:

> *Gee states that 'Social groups are deeply affiliated with formal school often incorporated into the socialization of their children, practices that resonate with later school-based secondary discourse'. However Kucer talks about different literacies acquired in different places. The literacy of home and how children benefited or got affected by these literacies when they reach school level. There is a similarity among these two claims. In a sense that Gee mentioned that primary discourses adapts or changes to second discourses. On the other hand, Kucer indicates how home literacy differs or align with school literacy.)*

Her responses start at a point where texts are seen as entirely authoritative, where her engagement with these is almost exclusively restricted to summary (*According to Gee …*, *Kucer talks about groups of memberships …*). However, she does make relevant links between the two readings. In the next week (Week 3), she moves towards making connections between herself and the text at an elementary level, mainly indicating agreement (*Engaging with this week's reading made me realize that there is more to our job [as teachers] than what people actually know* and *I also liked the manner in which he highlighted …*). Towards the end of the course, her discourse illustrates how her engagement with course material has moved to a more personal level as she links texts to

lived experiences. For example, in relation to a discussion in Week 10 about the complexity of living and working in multilingual and plurilingual societies, Tholakele displays a more authoritative voice than was ever evident in earlier weeks, indicating: ***I believe** [multilingualism] tends to be a learning barrier to learners as it tempers with their progression to the next grade*. Adding to this, in response to an article by Sibanda (2019), Tholakele challenges the author's stance on promoting some use of dialects in the language classroom:

> *I for one believe that the recognition of Lok'shin (South African dialect for 'township') lingua can also pose a challenge in a sense that, those spoken languages are mostly informal, differs in terms of dialects and they cannot be administered in formal schooling as they are not developed as well.*

Though Tholakele's stance is problematic in the context of the course, and there is still much room for deeper thinking on her part, at the end of the course, we see a definite morphogenesis of agency (cf. Case 2015), displayed in the finding of Tholakele's authorial scholarly voice rather than mainly restricting her interaction with texts to agreement:

> *The unspoken truth is that we teach to cover the syllabus and administer assessments, forgetting the most crucial factor which is to instil more than just content to our learners. This is because of the curriculum prescribed to us which has loops here and there. Unfortunately, if we continue to accept this and not initiating change, we are still going to face challenges like these.*

In the first weeks of the course, her lecturers typically asked Tholakele probing questions, urging her to reflect more deeply about comments made, and to interpret course texts based on her own lived experiences and development of scholarly thought. In the final weeks, we acknowledge Tholakele 's growth in doing just this. For example, in a global response to all students in the cohort in Week 11, Dr Z highlights a response by Tholakele: [*Tholakele] hits hard with the observation that 'There is indeed linguistic racism in our country, and we should not pride ourselves as being diverse. Having read this week's articles and watched that video. I see no diversity'*. In this week, Tholakele's reading response triggers more dialogic interaction from students responding to her than

had been observed anywhere else in the course; there are seven extensive responses following her original post. Tholakele has moved from observer to a position closer to that of pivot. This level of engaged dialogic interaction is what we would have liked to see more regularly in the forum discussions. To draw on Frances' metaphor, at the end of the course Tholakele became a social butterfly, finding her voice in the course and amongst her peers.

As is the case with her individual reading responses, Tholakele's comments in relation to other students' responses also show progress towards authorial voice and concomitant agency. In responding to a Week 11 reading response in which Refilwe argues that English competence is still used as a gatekeeper, Tholakele adds:

> *I encore your point on English competence. It is also viewed or seen as a measure of intelligence. This was even evident in Makoe and McKinney (2014) where they interviewed the Head of language that mentioned 'Brighter girls…. Good English' by that you can see that students' intelligence is basically judged upon their proficiency in English.*

With increasing confidence Tholakele draws connections between texts, critically integrating her own voice as she does so. Her questioning voice, however, remains largely absent throughout the course.

We see Tholakele's progression from being a wallflower to being a more active and critical course participant with an increasingly foregrounded voice, at three levels: in her interaction with texts, in her interactions with fellow students, and in lecturers' responses to her. By the end of the course Tholakele is still not amongst the strongest students and has some way to go before reaching the level of critical engagement we would like postgraduate students to exhibit. Despite this somewhat limited progress, the discussion forums became a vehicle through which she could navigate her role shift from that of unconfident wallflower to that of emerging scholar. The move from one role to another as the course progresses can also be seen in Frances' journey, which in many respects is the inverse of that of Tholakele. Both students are purposeful in their journey from one role to another and even in the role of wallflower, strategic agency is enacted.

6 Concluding Thoughts

This chapter illustrates how student engagement, and an enhanced sense of

agency (Case 2015) was brought about at least partly through the way in which the course's dialogic pedagogy was structured to facilitate not only the right to speak, but also the requirement to speak. This postgraduate journey gave students opportunities to reflect on past, present and future imagined identities and to begin taking on the identities of emerging scholars. It is our hope that many of them will take these new ways of being and knowing, the 'capacity for action' (Case 2015) and 'the right to speak' (Norton 2013) into their further postgraduate studies and their classrooms.

Theoretically, we take Norton's 'right to speak' further in two ways. Firstly, we argue that 'the right to speak' needs to be coupled with 'the requirement to speak' for optimal student engagement in a postgraduate context such as ours. The course was set up in such a way that it was not possible for students, even for the wallflowers in our course, to bypass posting the weekly reading response as it formed the foundation of the summative reading response assignment. This requirement to speak, we believe, worked towards enabling the 'parity of participation' (Luckett & Shay 2017: 3) required of more equitable postgraduate pedagogy, which Luckett (2017) argues is our ethical responsibility, particularly in the Global South. Secondly, our data analysis highlighted that students, specifically those embodying the role of pivot, can play an important role in encouraging their peers to speak in courses that are underpinned by a carefully structured dialogic pedagogy. How students chose to take up the right to speak differed as they embodied different roles within the online pedagogic space. The roles we identified in our study, namely those of pivots, provocateurs and wallflowers, were likely similar to those typically evident in a face-to-face classroom, but the online space has specific affordances which a face-to-face environment cannot replicate, and therefore allowed us to see nuanced manifestations of these roles. This is because the online space enables not only the strong voices (provocateurs) to speak, but also encourages the quieter voices (wallflowers) to operate agentively within a learning space when they are required to participate beyond just listening. Students have opportunities to re-read and to reflect before offering their own responses, rather than having to respond 'in the moment', thus enhancing the possibility of the 'high levels of self-reflexivity' which according to Luckett and Blackie (2022:8) are a key part of the 'intentional human agency' involved in social change.

In her summative assignment, Tholakele, in response to a course reading on language narratives, states: *Having read these language narratives,*

it [is] indeed evident that our identities are not fixed. Instead, they keep on changing with an effect of our environments or new surroundings. Similarly, one could argue that how students' express agency is not fixed and that structural course conditions which are designed to promote positive expressions of student agency can indeed do so. In the examples we have used in this study, the majority of students enacted very clear roles at various points in their learning journey, though these roles shifted for many of them, sometimes within the same discussion, and sometimes as the course progressed. Students made agentive choices about the extent to which they engaged and invested in the course, and this impacted on the roles they played and the development of a range of voices: critical, questioning voices; ambivalent, confused voices; authoritative, assertive voices; personal, professional, and academic voices. Their exposure to a range of roles and voices made the learning environment particularly rich, opening up numerous possibilities and choices for them. In our initial reading of the data we were struck by the specific roles that students took up in the discussion groups. However, after a few closer readings, our preliminary analysis was disrupted by the realisation that in many instances students made agentive micro choices to shift roles in response to personal and structural factors. For example, Anathi shifted from pivot to wallflower, while Tholakele briefly shifted from wallflower to pivot. Refilwe at times shifted from pivot to provocateur. Only Siboniso sustained a single role as provocateur throughout. Hence, we needed to adopt a more nuanced, flexible way of under-standing student roles.

The findings of this study have implications for postgraduate curriculum design and pedagogy. Postgraduate courses frequently entail weekly discussions of readings with this approach underpinned by assumptions of homogenous postgraduate students who already have all the academic reading and writing knowledge and skills required for success. However, there is a paucity of research about what a meaningful and inclusive postgraduate pedagogy might entail. A carefully structured dialogic postgraduate pedagogy opens the space to students from diverse backgrounds to find multiple entry points to learning, while the focus on theory and practice enables the students to make connections between new knowledge, their lived experiences, and social change. Moreover, in both online and blended learning postgraduate courses, weekly online reflexive reading response forums can play an important role in facilitating engaged, agentive student learning for a wide range of students. It is useful for course lecturers to be cognisant of the nuanced and

changing roles students choose for themselves within a postgraduate learning space that is inclusive and hospitable and which facilitates 'the right to speak' (Norton 2013:170) for all students.

In summary, we argue that while creating an inclusive postgraduate course that promotes student agency continues to be a challenge for many lecturers and students throughout Africa, our research findings suggest that the following can contribute to transformation in postgraduate education:

- provision of safe spaces for 'risk-taking' and exploration of new ideas, dialogically;
- facilitation of opportunities for lecturers and students to reflect, both affirmatively and critically, on their own lived experiences within African contexts;
- validation of those lived experiences by drawing on texts from the Global South which are positioned as being in conversation with those from the Global North;
- affirmation of the right to speak, while simultaneously making participation in online discussion forums a requirement for completion of a course.

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Belinda Mendelowitz
Associate Professor
Division of Languages, Literacies and Literatures
School of Education
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg. South Africa
Belinda.Mendelowitz@wits.ac.za

Ilse Fouche
Senior Lecturer
Division of Languages, Literacies and Literatures
School of Education
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg, South Africa
ilse.fouche@wits.ac.za

Yvonne Reed
Visiting Associate Professor
School of Education
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg, South Africa
Yvonne.Reed@wits.ac.za

Grant Andrews
Lecturer and Teaching Scholar
SCU College, Southern Cross University Australia
Gold Coast, Australia
grant.andrews@scu.edu.au

B. Mendelowitz, I. Fouche, Y. Reed, G. Andrews & F. Vally Essa

Fatima Vally Essa
Lecturer, Researcher & PhD Candidate
Division of Languages, Literacies and Literatures
School of Education
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg, South Africa
Fatima.essa@wits.ac.za