Teacher education students engaging with digital identity narratives

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Teaching English with digital technology has exacerbated the process of teaching and learning. In youth leisure, computers are more than information devices: they convey stories, images, identities, and fantasies through providing imaginative opportunities for play, and as cultural and ideological forms. In this paper, I report on a project conducted with teacher education students at a university in Johannesburg, South Africa. The focus of the project is to examine how students construct their identities digitally through the multimodal narratives they create in the English classroom. To do this I report on two narratives, as well as a recurring theme, decolonisation. The latter theme is significant because it was during the time of this project that South African universities found themselves in the grip of decolonisation and free education protests. I use New Literacy Studies as a framework to theorise literacy practices, and the work of Hall and others to theorise identity. The paper presents further possible implications of digital identity construction for teaching and learning.

Keywords: decolonization; digital identities; digital literacies; digital narratives; higher education; South Africa

Introduction

Literacy educators can no longer confine themselves to defining literacy in terms of alphabetic practices alone. We communicate and make meaning through new media texts, which cannot be devalued, marginalised, or ignored in the curriculum. To do so runs the risk estranging students who are communicating increasingly in networked environments (Selfe & Hawisher, 2004, in Gainer & Lapp, 2010). In this paper I report on the Cyber Lives project conducted in Johannesburg, South Africa since 2016. My focus is on digital narrative identity construction in the context of South Africa, using a theoretical overview of digital literacies and identities, and an analysis of two digital case studies as support. I also consider one of the recurring narrative themes: decolonisation. Thereafter I consider implications of work on digital narrative identity construction for teaching and learning, such as re-imagining composing opportunities in the university English classroom, through leveraging students' semiotic resources.

The Project: Deconstructing Digital Literacies

The Cyber Lives project responded to increasing calls to integrate technology into teaching and learning at schools and in higher education institutions in South Africa. Mechanistically incorporating technology in teaching and learning, with little understanding of how young people engage with meaning making in their communities and social lives, is inadequate. Thus, the team embarked on a journey involving digital games, social networking sites, digital stories, and multi-user domains (MUDs).[i] The three aims of the Cyber Lives Project are:

- to map digital literacy practices across contexts in-and out-of-school;
- to establish connections with and an understanding of students' digital identity narratives; and
- to consider the implications of digital practices for teaching and learning English.

The focus of this paper is the digital identity narrative. In this strand, I examine how students in a university English classroom negotiate their identities digitally through the multimodal narratives they compose. The paper aims further to examine the possible implications of such constructions and understandings of identity for teaching and learning.

Literature Review
Going digital in South Africa

In settings where resources are limited, technological change ushers in opportunities like never before. In Africa, such developments are recognised for their potential to meet the demands of communities and society at large. Countries appear to embrace technology to increase access to educational opportunities and to expand curricula. Online learning plays a constructive role, not only for students, but for teachers and communities as well (Rupp, 2012:1). Technology also changes channels of communication and school texts: interactive textbooks and educational games can be introduced to create digital classroom environments in urban and rural areas alike, where, Rupp (2012) continues, this is especially the case with previously scarce and unreliable power sources. However, the situation is not straightforward. Some of the constraints to online learning on the continent include inequitable access: issues with bandwidth, poor financial resources, inconsistent access to electricity, human resource capacity, lack of training and trained teachers, lack of suitable materials, and political instability. Thus there are constraints to going digital in Africa.

However, there are several initiatives currently being implemented that seek to overcome these challenges. As reported by Rupp (2013) in South Africa for instance, a project initiated by Vodacom,[ii] together with the Eastern Cape Department of Education, is the development of a new technology centre in the Lady Frere District that will increase educational opportunities and training for students and teachers, respectively. The project has the potential to train more than 1,400 teachers; build curricula and teaching resources; as well as improve accessibility of these resources. These endeavours have the potential to standardise and improve teaching and learning in urban and rural schools, and to create equal opportunities for the learners.

Deconstructing literacy and digital literacy
Notwithstanding challenges as described in the previous section, wikis, blogs, tweeting, texting, and fan fiction are currently standard fare for most students. New technologies call for new literacy practices to exploit their possibilities (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro & Cammack, 2004). Youth Discourses (explained later in this section) are rapidly changing. Exponents of New Literacy Studies (NLS) use the concept 'multiliteracies' to refer to the pluralisation of literacy communication channels, and say that new media require new competencies. Sociocultural diversity further necessitates a multiple understanding of literacy. Paul Gilster (1997:1–2), who introduced our current understanding of digital literacy (DL), described the concept as "the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources when it is presented via computers." However, digital literacy exceeds mastering technical skills. Through the lens of New Literacy Studies (NLS), DL means thinking about literacy as a social practice, rather than as a skill. This definition draws on Street and Gee's conceptions of literacy. Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) and Street (2003, 2004) suggest that literacy is not only a skill, but a contextualised practice, thus NLS refer to language and literacy as social practices, as well as skills to be learnt in formal education. Literacy practices and associated events are situated in "social, cultural, historical and political relationships […] and are embedded in structures of power" (Barton & Hamilton, 2012:8). Being literate thus means being competent across several discourse communities (Gee, 2007; Larson & Marsh, 2015). Literacy practices are embedded in Discourses (Gee, 2007) and integral to our practices. Gee's (2007:21) use of the term 'Discourses' (mentioned earlier in this section) refers to "ways of being in the world," chosen over 'discourses' that refer primarily to stretches of language. Within the framework of NLS then, it is assumed that literacy is a "critical social practice that is constructed in everyday interactions across local contexts" (Gee, 2007:25).

Given the digital nature of this study, as well as its focus on protest and identity, is consideration of power relations in a world of digital networking and communication. Technology in the digital age extends to all domains of social life, and plays an equalising role in power relations. Power relations are thus shaped by the communication field (Castells, 1996).

In the linguistic world, text refers to written ideas, and is usually synonymous with print. A search for the term digital literacy, for instance, may yield "a range of results: digital media, new technologies, new literacies or NLS; or things that digitally literate people produce such as blogs, wikis, podcasts; or activities in which digitally literate people engage, such as digital storytelling, social networking, webpage creation" (Beach, O'Brien & Scharber, 2006:12). DL therefore incorporates composing and deconstructing multi-modal texts. In multimodal composing and de-construction, concepts are represented through "print, visual (photos, videos), and audio texts (music), as well as dramatic performance (drama, dance)" (Vasudevan, Schultz & Bateman, 2010:442). Within a digital framework then, text is a multimodal source, across sociocultural domains. The authors define digital literacy as "socially situated practices supported by skills and strategies that enable the representation and understanding of ideas using a range of modalities enabled by digital tools" (Vasudevan et al., 2010:443). Digital literacy therefore enables the bridging and complementing of traditional print literacies with other media. Therefore, according to Bawden (2008, in Lankshear & Knobel, 2008), with literacy in the digital age, the traditional idea of being able to read or write utilising technology becomes increasingly narrow. If digital sources can generate multiple sources of texts, such as sound and image, then a new form of literacy becomes necessary. Digital literacy further varies according to "an individual's life circumstances, and will change and develop over time since it involves attitudes and personal qualities as well as knowledge and skills" (Martin, 2008:175).

Despite inconsistency in the use of the term, several authors and researchers subsequent to Gilster use digital literacy to denote a broad concept, linking together other relevant literacies, based on information and communications technology (ICT) competencies and skills, but focusing on 'softer' skills of information retrieval and knowledge assembly, together with understanding and attitudes (Bawden, 2008). As Martin (2008:175) says, we do not need one literacy to rule them all: "digital literacy is a condition not a threshold." Colin Lankshear, when interviewed by Kalantzis, Cope and

The Learning by Design Project Group (2005:200–201) emphasised:

> Language, visuals and sound […] are all being manufactured in the same raw material on the same plane, on the same platform. Give human beings the capacity to communicate in any way and they'll take it up. We are witnessing a huge turn away from the dominance of alphabetical language; a turn away from privileging isolated written language; and a turn towards the visual. This turn to the visual can partly be understood in terms of the fact that in the current context of globalisation, when languages are not mutually intelligible, you have to carry things visually.

Lankshear, then, refers to the multiple nature of literacy. As teachers we cannot only depend on the alphabetical and skills-based planes, and need to consider the multiple modalities, such as the visual and auditory, with which our students engage.

With the growing convergence of media, blurred boundaries between information and other media are commonplace. In youth leisure, computers are more than information devices: they tell stories, images, identities, fantasies. They provide imaginative opportunities for play. They provide new ways of mediating the student's world. The youth engages with media not just as expedient technology, but as cultural form. Their actions are mediated by digital tools. Digital technology is therefore a sign of social change. Digital tools empower individuals to introduce themselves to society through blogs, websites, email, texting, and so on. Young people are active media producers and consumers, which ensures the importance of digital competence in a democratic and information-driven society. This in turn facilitates the construction of digital identities. However, while these are intrinsic to the youth's world, they are often neglected in classrooms that rely on established curricula for practices that are responsive to individual needs of students given the mandate of high stakes forms of assessment for more pragmatic reasons. Teachers cannot afford to neglect these experiences, nor can they consider technology in a purely technicist manner.

Digital identity: Constructing identities and virtual identities

Clearly, understanding participation in social networking sites involves thinking about ways in which people negotiate meaning through digital text while interacting as members of Discourses. Digital media require high levels of literacy compared to textual literacy (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Machet, 2002).

The construction of virtual identities in the limitless world of the internet is inevitable. Anonymity and the creation of persona are endemic. The internet has become a "significant social laboratory, where people experiment with constructions and reconstructions of self, which in essence characterize postmodern life" (Turkle,

1995:27). Users take on multiple identities in the form of real and virtual selves. Identities are constructed through multiple roles, personalities, relationships and ethics. These become visible through the use of language and social cues such as emoticons in virtual environments. People are positioned with multiple identities at each log on. Shifting identities are intrinsic to virtual games and social networking sites. These virtual platforms provide new contexts in which to explore identities and enact new ones (Asgari & Kaufman, 2005).

This take on identity aligns with Hall's (1992) view of declining old identities. New identities present the individual as a fragmented subject. This crisis of identity (Hall, 1992) is essential to change, which is disrupting the central structures of society, which previously grounded people. Thus, as indicated by Castells (1996), people make meaning, on the basis of what they believe they are, not on the basis of what they do. Castells (2004) also suggests that, from a sociological perspective, all identities are constructed. In Castells' view "identity is people's source of meaning and experience" (Castells, 2004:6).

Postmodern perspectives view language and identity as embedded in larger social, political, economic and historical discourses (Kapp & Bangeni, 2011; Pavlenko, 2001; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Strong emphasis is also placed on "the productive force of language in constituting identity" (Pennycook, 2004:13). Pennycook (2004:8) uses the notion 'performativity' to explain the relationship as "the way in which we perform acts of identity as an ongoing series of social and cultural performances rather than an expression of prior identity." The basic premise is that discourses provide the subject with positions that people take on in different discourses or situations (Canagarajah, 1999; Kapp & Bangeni, 2011; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). For Weedon (1987), subjectivity refers to that aspect of the individual's psyche by means of which the person identifies him/herself in the world. This means assuming a particular subject position within a particular discourse. For this, subjectivity is flexible, and likely to change with new discourses. Social practices are therefore implausible without linguistic and discursive interaction (Kapp & Bangeni, 2011). Identity is seen as fluid, and individuals have agency to position and reposition themselves. Resultant individual emotions like "the desire for recognition, the desire for affiliation, and the desire for security and safety" arise (Norton, 1997, cited in Kapp & Bangeni, 2011:199). However, "individual access to subjectivity is governed by historically specific social factors and the forms of power at work in a particular society" (Weedon, 1992:95). Kapp and Bangeni add that "the degree to which individuals are able to reconstruct who they are is regulated by the extent

to which they are able to access the material, linguistic, social and cultural resources" (2011:200).

Vasudevan et al. (2010), in conceptualising literate identities, draw on sociocultural theories of identities and literacies. They reason that individuals draw on identities that are both locally positioned as well as those without time and space constraints. In the same vein, Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain (1998:271) explore identity in relation to agency. They explain that people construct their identities in "figured worlds" or culturally shared spaces and practices, that is, they take on identities in relation to context and lived experience. Identities are therefore not separate from social contexts but personified and enacted in practice.

The above discussion is relevant to literacy research, which can be approached in two ways: school-based focus on reading and writing, and out-of-school research with its literacy practices that occur in a range of institutional and social spaces. Despite opportunities for multimodal composing out-of-school (e.g. blogging, social networking), youth are mostly limited to reading and composing on paper in school. They are rarely invited to bring their out-of-school practices into the classroom. As Vasudevan et al. argue, "Even within a climate where students' identities are increasingly circumscribed, there continues to exist possibilities for productive disruption of these normative definitions of what it means to be literate within classroom boundaries" (2010:446). There-fore, stories are significant for shaping social realisms (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) and for providing opportunities for us as storytellers to assume narrative power in shaping our identity (Dyson & Genishi, 1994).

Digital narrative and agency
A multimodal understanding of composing in the English classroom, widens the lens of composing to include different modal affordances, identities, structures, social interactions and relationships that shape the engagement of multimodality to produce meaning (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). The use of multimodality for composing is evident in digital stories and podcasts, for instance; all of which are increasingly popular with the youth. Hull's (2003) project to promote digital storytelling in out-of-school centres refers. Through engaging with multimodality, the youth produced new texts for new audiences and participated across online and offline spaces. They transcend boundaries and their identities were dispersed over time (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007). According to Hull (2003), rich multi-modal contexts provide the youth with the opportunities to construct their identities across multiple kinds of texts that represent a variety of stories. New spaces and learning tools can

therefore result in powerful forms of identity construction (Hull & Katz, 2006), and through such spaces, composers can construct more powerful selves. Research on narratives and their importance are not unknown. Hull and Katz (2006) cite several examples, for instance, Ochs and Capps (1996) and Miller and colleagues' work on personal story-telling, which demonstrate narratives as social practices, as well as their work with families from diverse backgrounds, where children become co-storytellers.

Key concepts I focus on are 'self,' 'voice' and 'agency.' Bakhtin uses the metaphor of voice as multiple and dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981). He sees voices as multiple, as individuals encounter and engage in multiple discourses. Agency (or freedom to act in a particular way) is another key concept. To theorise identity and agency, Hull and Katz (2006) refer to what Vygotsky termed "semiotic means," which Cole and Wertsch (1996) later reconceptualised as "cultural artefacts." We draw on our cultural artefacts in constructing our identities. Holland et al. (1998:40) made connec-tions between semiotic mediation and cultural artefacts with identity formation and agency in the following way:

> Persons develop more or less conscious conceptions of themselves as actors in socially and culturally constructed worlds, and these senses of themselves, these identities, to the degree that they are conscious and objectified, permit these persons, through the kinds of semiotic mediation described by Vygotsky, at least a modicum of agency or control over their own behaviour.

Another key concept of narratives are "turning points" (Bruner, 1994, in Hull & Katz, 2006). Bruner (1994, in Hull & Katz, 2006) conceptualises these as moments when people report major change in their lives, which also signifies changes in self. These turning points represent a connection between external and internal awakenings or activities. Performative moments (Hull & Katz, 2006) may be represented by turning points in an individual's life. In the field of literacy, sign systems have varying status across communities (The New London Group, 1996). This is true of speech, writing, performing, and the visual. Thus, there is inordinate potential for work on identity construction in multimodal contexts.

Research Context, Approach and Methodology
In this study, I examine how two young people construct their identities digitally, through their narratives, and the implications this may have for teaching and learning English. The context is an English Methodology module in the Faculty of Education at a university in Johannesburg. The faculty serves pre-service teachers, in the case of this study, pre-service English teachers. I used two narratives as qualitative case studies in this project. Case studies are designed to gain deep under-

standing of the situation and meaning for those involved. They are in-depth, descriptive pieces of research that focus on bounded instances (Lankshear, 1999; Yin, 1994, 2018). The interest is in the process, rather than on outcomes. I drew on Candappa's (2017) justification for the case study, which lies in its potential for learning, and its explanatory power. Using Denzin and Lincoln's notion that qualitative researchers "deploy a wide range of interconnected methods, hoping always to get a better fix on the subject matter at hand" (1998:3), as well as Candappa's "multiple sources of evidence" (2017:181), the digital texts and interviews with participants served as data gathering methodologies within the case study. The digital texts were selected on the basis of what fit the project aims in terms of identity construction. I report on only two participants from a class of 50 in this paper. While relying on only two narratives and interviews may be limiting, to mitigate this I relied on criterion-based sampling, more specific-ally, a quota selection, or an arbitrary number of participants of the major, relevant subgroup (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, in Merriam, 1988). Interviews are productive in terms of gathering data for case studies as they focus directly on the case study topic. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted. I feel comfortable using semi-structured interviews, which rely on a basic interview guide, which may be elaborated on during the course of the interview. I also did not feel bound to ordering the questions. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed in order to ensure accuracy. Interviewees were given copies of transcripts on which to comment for accuracy, and in order to ensure member-checking as a form of validity. Audio recording might allow for greater accuracy, although the presence of an audio recorder may also distract or hamper certain interviewees. It is inevitable too that transcription loses certain data aspects from the original encounter.

The two participants in this study are Tabang and Dino, two 22-year old pre-service English teachers. Both are second language speakers of English. Students were tasked to design digital narratives that best constructed their identities as teachers. Most used Moviemaker, and in some instances, PowerPoint. Each narrative included a turning point, which focused on their decision to become teachers. Case study analysis is difficult because the analytical techniques are not well-defined (Yin, 2018). To analyse the digital narratives, I relied on content analysis. I identified themes or patterns in the narratives. In this case, I refer to the themes presented within the narratives. With regard to the visual data, I used Hamilton's (2000) framework for visual (photograph) analysis, by focusing on: participants, settings, artefacts, and activities.

Digital Narratives: Tabang and Dino
Tabang
Tabang's narrative opens with a scene of a little boy on the street, which sets the tone for the rest of his story. The boy appears hopeless as he rests his head on his arms. A brown paper bag rests next to him. Tabang says his journey began in poverty 17 years ago, when he "wore a mask to school." Because of his underprivileged circumstances, and a broken home, he did not have hope for the future. To illustrate this, his movie depicts a shack in a state of disrepair as one of its focal images. He says he was abused as a child, and has a "broken heart." However, his turning point came when he en-countered teachers who were inspiring. This represented teaching to him. In particular, teaching English meant to him "To give a girl the opportunity to speak in class for the first time without fear" it gave him a sense of hope. He saw teaching as a way to offer value to the world. He says teaching is "less of a job and more pleasure." His intention is "To make a difference to a child who says I can't."

For Tabang, his humble beginnings pre-empted his journey to becoming a teacher. He constructs himself as hard-working, and deter-mined to make change for his students. From a postmodern perspective, his identity is embedded in his socio-cultural context, his humble begin-nings. He performs his identity through his subject position, through wanting to make change for his students, by being an agent of change, and in making their lives better. He sees his role as teacher as empowering others. He is able to reconstruct his identity from helpless, poverty-stricken, abused child. The opportunity to study teaching and to narrate his story, has given him agency, and his story has, in turn, shaped his social reality. His story thus further served as cultural and semiotic artefact. When interviewed Tabang had this to say about what his narrative meant to him:

> To me the story is a sign that I made it to this stage. This would be impossible if I think of how I grew up. Usually no one cares of who you are and how you get here. This story gives you a chance, you feel like someone is listening to you. You are not a nobody. My students will not be nobodies. I will acknowledge them.

Despite the harsh realities noted above, young people like Tabang are potentially resilient and find innovative ways to adapt to social change; they represent endurance, confidence, hope and success. The digital story for Tabang represented acknow-ledgement that someone wanted to know about him. Students appear to identify turning points in their lives as assistance from people, and become change agents. They are immersed in group and communal solidarity: this is a narrative of triumph over adversity.

Dino

The focus of Dino's narrative was decolonisation (explained in greater detail in the section to follow). The title was "I aim to decolonise." The narrative opened with a short video clip of a large group of students carrying anti-decolonisation placards, while they danced and sang an apartheid protest song, Siyaya, in isiZulu. The words of the song translate roughly into "We are going forward, despite them shooting at us or hitting us." Thereafter a narration and headline appeared: "What does it mean to teach, to be a teacher?" Dino narrated, "To be a teacher means to decolonise [...] to think about what we teach and how we teach it, especially English. We need to bring Africa into our teaching, an Africa that is our own." Thereafter followed visuals of students protesting, holding placards, while police with protective shields and helmets stood on the periphery. One of the visuals included academic staff protesting (in their red academic gowns), as well as university workers in their overalls, alongside students. The narrative continues, "I pay to enter, I am searched to enter, I am finger-printed to enter. My mother sells veg-etables, spills blood and tears on the streets so that I may be here," the latter accompanied by a slide of a woman selling vegetables on the street. He refers to university policy of policing students and staff: identifying students and staff through their finger prints, and private security guards, who were employed to ensure that students were not harmed during the protests. Police were often called in to disrupt student gatherings that were potentially dangerous. Often there were claims and counter-claims around who was responsible for violence and damage to property. Further visuals include episodes of violence: of police teargassing students, a policeman pinning a student to the ground, and a student holding a brick. He narrates "We don't want violence, but when elders refuse to listen, what do we do? I want to be a teacher who makes a difference, who teaches from the African heart. Universities will decolonize, #feesmustfall." His reference to "elders" is university management who engaged in discussions with student leaders. His view is that student demands were not being heard. The reality of selling vegetables on the street that he refers to is not uncommon. Often women earn a living in this way, and support their children through school and university in the process. When asked what it meant to be a teacher who is aware of decolonisation, he said "It is our responsibility, we are responsible for lives (as teachers). It is justice. How can we as future teachers go out there (to schools) and teach an apartheid curriculum. Yes the curriculum has changed but many teachers have not." Dino feels that individual teachers have a responsibility to bring about change for reasons of justice. For him curriculum changes do not impact on students' lives if teachers interpret it in ways that do not allow for change.

Unpacking Thoughts on Decolonisation

During the time of this project, South African higher education underwent Fallist protest action, which started with the dismantling of the Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town. Rhodes was considered one of the colonial architects of South Africa. In similar vein, a process began where forms of colonial iconography began to be publicly identified and contested. Decolonisation, or the undoing of a colonial history is certainly not a new conflict in South Africa. In response to the country's iniquitous apartheid legacy, South Africa is constitutionally bound to focus on inclusivity and access. Currently, however, only 5% black children entering school are taken to graduation, while more than 60% white children complete this journey (Soudien, 2012). It is obvious that the social and economic climate has marginalised and failed to prepare a majority of its youth for university. Fees Must Fall is an aspect of the protest movement that began in October 2015 in response to annual fee increases at South African universities. News of the university protests spread rapidly worldwide, through the use of social media and hashtags, when several confrontations between police and students turned violent. According to a staff writer (2016:1) of *BusinessTech*, the movement constituted "a clear call for a free decolonised, afrocentric education," which is "rooted in the liberation of black people and the dismantling of the anti-black system that maintains black oppression." The Fallist movement has become intersectional, located as a part of the larger struggle to eradicate colonial capitalist patriarchal culture. In explaining decolonised education, those supporting the Fallist movement demonstrated that South Africa took on a system of education that is inadequate for the new dispensation. The 2015 protest ended with a decision by Government not to increase fees for the following year. However, 2016 saw the re-birth of the movement when the decision could not be upheld. At the time of writing this piece, the issues concerned remained under partial implementation and discussion, with many universities taking up the call to reconsider policies and curricula.

Fallist decolonisation appears to have influenced several of the student narratives, with students predominantly identifying with the struggle. The protests shaped identities in that many mentioned their financial struggles: in paying fees, finding accommodation, buying food, or just surviving day to day. Narratives that supported the protests were in favour of what was happening, and felt the need to decolonise education was an enduring battle. Several points were emphasised: the black struggle, that university curricula were

still not representative of freedom, transformation and social justice, and management bureaucracy in the face of protests. Management upheld its decision to protect staff and students by engaging additional security measures. In terms of sporadic instances of violence experienced (for instance a university hall and bus that were set alight, supposedly by protesters), students were convinced that violence was not a suitable solution, even in the face of police instigation or retaliation. However, they voiced their disappointment at what they felt was a "rehash of apartheid" (Dino), for instance, when university management employed security guards to monitor campus entry. Students referred to this as reminiscent of apartheid monitoring. Most students were born into South Africa's democracy, yet maintained they felt disillusioned with the older generation, as well as in some instances, the current ANC government. There were claims that they were being "sold out" and that they were being used as "pawns." They also felt that university needed an "African voice" or "African flavour" (Dino). In general, theirs was a discourse of protest, disappointment, disillusionment, and even counter-narrative.

In essence then, this project examined how students in a university English classroom constructed their identities through their digital narratives. From the two narratives presented, as well as interviews conducted, themes of poverty, hope, success, resilience and being a change agent emerged (Tabang). Striking was the association with decolonised, free education, that was seen as a response to student poverty as well as political freedom (Dino).

In the section to follow, I turn to some of the potential implications such a study could hold for teaching and learning.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

Narratives such as the two presented, and the decolonisation theme introduced, allow me to re-imagine opportunities for composing in the university English classroom across various institutional and community contexts. They demonstrate the opportunities teachers can utilise for youth agency and voice. When students are invited to bring their knowledge and expertise with composing tools in the classroom, their literate identities are understood shifts. Bringing multiple modalities into the classroom enables students to use their knowledge and experience from their homes and communities. This ensures the potential for new understandings of authoring texts and school participation. "Through their engagement with multiple modalities of expression, youth are able to reflect on their past, document their present, and dream about their future." (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López & Tejeda, 1999:287). This kind of Third Space Pedagogy presented by Gutiérrez et

al. (1999:287) provides for "a classroom community of difference that uses multiple mediating tools and makes use of all the spatial, cultural and linguistic resources of its participants." Emphasis should be placed rather on drawing on students' semiotic resources to gently scaffold them into school literacies (Moje, Young, Readence & Moore, 2000).

The theme on decolonisation is also important to review. We need to consider what it means to decolonise education: by paying heed to our curricula, programmes, modules, their content, texts, and mode of delivery. The validity of what we teach needs to be evaluated continuously. We need to consider, in this case, what it entails to be a truly African university. Oftentimes, university managers are obliged to pursue notions of world-class excellence, yet may be remiss in pursuing an African agenda with similar vigour.

At this point, it is imperative to reflect on the language issue. Language, as elaborated below, is vital to issues of decolonisation (refer for instance, to the work of Fanon, 2008; Wa Thiong'o, 1994). In the Faculty of Education, all students are required to complete a compulsory module in a regional African language, so that they may enter the teaching profession conversant in at least one African language spoken by the learners they are training to teach. However, the same cannot be said of all teaching and administrative staff. Given the the National Language Policy Framework in South Africa, which aims to promote 11 of its languages, we cannot relate to our students only in English, despite its status as a world language. It is imperative that staff speak at least one regional African language. Here I deliberately omit Afrikaans, which despite its status as an official language, having been mobilised an instrument of apartheid oppression, requires active backgrounding.

Conclusion

The concept of identity is loaded with meaning. This study served to examine whether the construction of identity is in any way moulded by the virtual spaces in which students participate. The study is designed to contribute to existing knowledge in a new way. It is inevitable that there are limitations to such studies, and that longer term studies with a larger range of cases would likely provide stronger results. We also need to look more closely at cyberspaces as ethnic enclaves, because literacy practices are often situated in a global trail of ideas where they are exposed to narratives, expectations, and values (Lam & Rosario-Ramos, 2009). When students are invited to bring their wealth of knowledge and linguistic proficiency into the classroom, these contribute to the composition and production of new knowledge. A literate identity undoubtedly contributes to these processes.

Acknowledgement

Notes

i. A multi-user domain (MUD) refers to text-based multiplayer virtual worlds. It might include role-playing games and online chat.
ii. Vodacom is a South African mobile communications company that provides voice, messaging and data services.
iii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.

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