

## **“We don’t Twitter, we Facebook”: An alternative pedagogical space that enables critical practices in relation to writing**

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*ABSTRACT: This article explores what happens to interpersonal and power dynamics when tutors use closed-group Facebook pages as a social networking tool in their tutorial groups with first and second year Bachelor of Education (BEd) students at the Wits School of Education (WSoE). It argues that this literacy practice creates an alternative pedagogical space that enables critical practices in relation to writing. These pages create a space that brings students’ out-of-school literacy practices into a domain which normally promotes formal, academic literacy practices; a schooled space; a space where students feel safe enough to make their voices heard; a space where there are some interesting shifts in power relationships, identities, norms of communication and modes of learning. The research analyses the writing of tutors and students on these pages from a critical literacy perspective and makes use of the critical literacy model presented by Janks (2010) to see how this space changes issues of power, access, diversity and design by creating new relationships and new forms of interaction, language and texts.*

*KEYWORDS: Facebook, social networking, critical literacy, power, access, diversity, design.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In response to the growing literacy crisis that permeates all levels of schooling in South Africa, including universities, (Howie et al., 2006; Higher Education South Africa [HESA], 2010), the WSoE proposed a curriculum innovation, a compulsory, core course in literacy for all first-year BEd students called *New Literacies for Teachers* (NLFT). This course is unique in that it focuses on the literacies that BEd students need to be successful in their own studies and to become effective teachers: academic and research literacies, multimodal and digital literacies, school literacies (literacies in the subjects they are going to teach) and out-of-school literacies, such as reading for pleasure or information and social networking. In 2009, I coordinated the development of this course and, in 2010, I coordinated the first year of implementation and redesign of the course. The development and implementation of this course are the focus of my research.

Technology has revolutionised the way that we communicate with each other, the way we use language, the way we read and write, the way we think and the way we teach (Crystal, 2004, 2008a, 2008b, 2011; Gee, 1996, 2000a, 2000b, 2008; Johnson, 2009; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; O’Brien & Sharber, 2008; Prensky, 2001).

Easy access to digital technologies in many parts of the world has changed the conditions of possibility of literacy events and new practices have developed... Social

networking has produced new forms of interacting, new forms of language and new kinds of texts. (*English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 10(1), 2011, Rationale)

Computer Mediated Communication (CMCs) and Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are becoming an integral part of literacy practices and teaching practices. It is therefore important that student teachers engage with the new communication landscape in a meaningful way. An important aspect of *New Literacies for Teachers* is the development of a critical awareness of the conventions, relationships, constructions of identity, types of communication, modes of learning and power dynamics that govern literacy practices in digital spaces.

## A SOCIO-CULTURAL APPROACH

Socio-cultural approaches to literacy, such as *New Literacy Studies* (NLS), see literacy as a set of socially-situated practices within specific domains. A domain is an abstract social space with particular values and beliefs that govern the way reading and writing are used within this space (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005; Street, 2003). *New Literacies for Teachers* is grounded in a socio-cultural approach to literacy. It focuses on five particular domains: the academic domain, the research domain, the school domain, the digital domain and the personal domain. It also explores how language and literacy are used for constructing identities, an important part of socio-cultural approaches (Gee, 1996; Jones, 2006; Moje & Luke, 2009). “By giving our students’ literacy practices recognition within classrooms, we let identity in” (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005). This paper focuses on the digital domain and the literacy practice of closed-group tutorial Facebook pages.

Within the digital domain in this course students engage in the course blog for academic purposes and in closed-group tutorial Facebook pages for social purposes. This provides an opportunity for students to develop “communicative competence” (Bachman, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1973) by using the codes that are appropriate for each literacy practice and each purpose. On the blog, students are required to use formal, academic language as they respond to academic articles and report on their personal reading. Participating on the blog is compulsory and forms part of their formal assessment for the course. Participating in the closed-group Facebook pages is voluntary and for social purposes rather than assessment.

In the digital era, “communicative competence” gains new meaning. Students and teachers need to engage with “a burgeoning variety of text forms” (New London Group, 1996, p. 61) and the varieties of registers, dialects and codes that are used in different domains “across media, genres and cultural frames of reference” (Luke, 2000, p. 72). Domains govern literacy practices and the kinds of language we use in them. In out-of-school literacy practices informal, colloquial registers, codes and in-group varieties are used to mark identity and to negotiate relationships and topics. Understanding these literacy practices and the language varieties used in them is an important part of literacy education (Du Plessis, 1995; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Jones, 2006; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Rowsell, Kosnik, & Beck, 2008).

Facebook is a literacy practice within the domain of social networking, which is governed by certain values, such as establishing and negotiating identity, building relationships, staying connected, brevity, conciseness and immediacy. Creativity is

valued and innovative codes are used. The mode is “chatting”, where “talk” becomes “text”. On the closed-group tutorial Facebook pages, students are encouraged to use their own codes because this provides opportunities to reflect on the values in this domain, the informal nature of these codes, how they relate to literacy development and how they construct identity (Crystal, 2004, 2008b, 2011; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Jones, 2006; Moje & Luke, 2009; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005). The data from these closed-group Facebook pages is of interest from different disciplinary perspectives: education, literacy, linguistics, sociolinguistics, internet linguistics and computer mediated communication (CMCs).

The use of informal “txting” codes has sparked much debate about the effect of these non-standard forms on literacy and language. There are those who think that the “relentless onward march of the texters” is “pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary” (Humphreys, 2007) and those who think “it is merely the latest manifestation of the human ability to be linguistically creative and to adapt language to suit the demands of diverse settings” (Crystal, 2008b). The use of “txtnng” codes on the closed-group Facebook pages provides a real context for students to engage in this debate, a debate which forms part of the course material.

Extracts from the Facebook pages provide authentic texts for a linguistic analysis of the set of “rules” or “conventions” for these language styles and codes, creating a new understanding of these diverse forms (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Rowsell et al., 2008). Crystal (2008a; 2008b; 2008c; 2011) refers to this as “internet linguistics”, a new field of study for a new domain. His research on the relationship between “txtnng” and literacy shows that the popular view that the use of abbreviations and slang used in SMS language will lead to low literacy and bad spelling among children is incorrect. Children and students need to have a good understanding of how the morphology, phonology and orthography of their languages work before they can create “txt” codes. “Txtnng” is not simply about saving time, energy and characters, but about innovation and creativity (Crystal, 2008a, 2008b, 2011).

## **RESEARCH ON FACEBOOK**

There has been a surge in research on Facebook from many different perspectives. There is research that focuses on: the negative aspects of Facebook such as privacy issues, risk-taking, stalking and online identity theft (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007); the social aspects of Facebook such as building “social capital” and how connections are made (Ellison et al., 2007; Lampe et al., 2007); identity formation and literacy development (Lam, 2000; Livingston, 2008); how a teacher’s use of Facebook impacts on learning (Mazer, Murphy & Simonds, 2007); using Facebook for academic purposes (De Villiers, 2010). Badenhorst’s research on the use of blogging for academic writing shows how blogging allows students to write with “voice” and engage more personally with academic tasks (Badenhorst, 2010).

The closed-group tutorial Facebook pages in this research form a different space in Facebook, a hybrid space that brings a popular out-of-school literacy practice into a schooled space. These pages are different from students’ own personal Facebook pages in several ways. The purpose is for communicating, building relationships and sharing experiences with academic classmates. Closed-group pages are more private in the sense that they can only be viewed by members of the group. If privacy settings

are appropriately set, members of the group cannot view each other’s walls unless they are “friended”. Some of the communication is social, about getting to know one another, congratulating other students on achievements, birthday wishes, feelings and what students are doing; but much of the communication is naturally about their studies, assignments, tests, what they are reading, their workload and teaching experience.

This paper fills a gap in the literature. It provides a critical literacy perspective on the use of closed-group tutorial Facebook pages for the purpose of social networking with and among students. This research uses Janks’ interdependent model of critical literacy (2010) to analyse the Facebook data. It is also different from other research on students using Facebook in that I, as their tutor, play an active role on the page, “hosting” the page, making students feel comfortable, responding to their posts and facilitating a new mode of learning.

My argument in this paper is that this literacy practice creates a space for critical practices in relation to writing. Allowing students to write in the codes they feel comfortable with “lets identity in” (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005), changes the power dynamics between the tutor and students and, within the group, encourages participation and allows students to “design” their own interactions. As students switch to an informal code, they are freed from the constraints of academic conventions, the “privileging of certain types of literacies and certain types of people” (Gee, 1996). There are those who would argue that by harnessing students’ popular out-of-school practices, we run the risk of colonising them and diminishing the pleasure students derive from them (see Burnett & Marchant in this issue). Because, in this course, joining the closed Facebook pages is voluntary, there is less danger of this happening. Even if this were not the case, I would argue that the evidence presented here suggests that students value opportunities for social networking for academic purposes and that the educational benefits support the use of Facebook.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In 2009, we began developing *New Literacies for Teachers*. Realising that for this course I would have to engage with social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Mixit, MySpace, YouTube and others, I approached my second-year language methodology class for help. “I need to learn how to use Twitter. Who will twitter with me?” I asked the group of 90 students. In response they told me, “We don’t Twitter, we Facebook.” 90% of students in the class indicated that they were regular users of Facebook.

At that stage I had never engaged with Facebook myself. In August 2009, with the help of one of my students, I set up my first closed-group Facebook page for second-year language methodology students, just before they embarked on their second teaching practice for the year. Students were encouraged to join the group and make three entries at least while they were away on teaching practice, sharing their experiences, offering advice and encouraging each other. They were encouraged to use the language or “code” that they usually used on Facebook (minus obscenities).

Subsequently, between August 2009 and April 2011, I set up three more closed-group tutorial Facebook pages, creating four research sites in total. Data for this research paper consists of authentic texts posted on these research sites over a period of two

years. The data comes straight from the wall posts and hasn’t been changed in any way, except to make it anonymous, and occasionally explain words. I have left my own name on wall posts so that my role is easily identifiable.

In 2010 and 2011 in *New Literacies for Teachers*, several other tutors ran closed-group Facebook pages that I had access to. I visited the tutors’ pages on a regular basis to observe what was happening. I draw from these sites to compare how the tutors used them with my own practice, occasionally using posts from their walls. It is data from these Facebook pages that forms the basis for the argument outlined in the introduction.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework used to analyse this data is drawn from the critical literacy model presented by Janks (2004, 2010), in which she argues for the crucial interdependence of four orientations to critical literacy: power, access, diversity and design.

**Power** is one orientation towards critical literacy. Theorists using this orientation are interested in the relationship between power, language and literacy. Language and literacy are often used to reproduce or maintain dominance. Critical Language Awareness looks at how choices in texts foreground certain things and hide others.

**Access** to dominant literacies is necessary for students to be successful. But this orientation creates an awareness of a paradox: when we give students access to dominant literacies, in this case academic literacies, without acknowledging their diverse languages, literacies and discourses, we simply re-affirm the dominant language, literacies and discourses.

**Diversity** orientations towards critical literacy focus on how identities are embedded in different cultures and how we construct these identities through language and literacy practices. Teachers need to acknowledge the diversity of their students’ identities, cultures, languages, discourses and literacy practices. They need to ensure “that students’ different ‘ways with words’ (Heath, 1983) have a place in the classroom” (Janks, 2010, p. 25).

**Design** orientations towards critical literacy focus on how students draw from their diverse language and semiotic systems to create, design or redesign meaning and “challenge and change existing discourses”. “Human creativity” and innovation become important. Technology has revolutionised the design process and students’ literacy practices (Janks, 2010, p. 25).

Key to Janks’ model is the idea that focusing on one orientation at the expense of the others skews the picture. The four orientations are “crucially interdependent”:

Deconstruction without reconstruction or design reduces human agency; diversity without access ghettoises students. Domination [power] without difference and diversity loses the ruptures that produce contestation and change (Janks, 2004, p. 6).

## **ETHICAL ISSUES**

Ethics permission was granted by the university to research our teaching practices and using Facebook is one of my teaching practices. Facebook is considered to be public domain and it is possible to view anyone’s personal page, if they haven’t set their privacy settings.

However, closed-group tutorial Facebook pages are a bit different. On joining the group, students understand that this is a private space for the tutorial group to interact and only members of the group can view the wall postings. Consequently I obtained informed consent from all the students whose posts I wanted to use in this article. I also undertook to ensure that all posts used are anonymous. Occasionally, where it is important to know gender or cultural information, this has been encoded in pseudonyms.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

Tutors used their Facebook pages in different ways: for sending messages to the group, for responding to students needs, for sharing interesting readings, newspaper texts and YouTubes, for encouraging interaction and participation, for discussing important concepts and debates. Some tutors were more enthusiastic about the project than others and their pages flourished.

Students used the closed-group Facebook page mainly for social purposes such as getting to know one another and establishing a class identity, communicating with people they wouldn’t normally communicate with, supporting each other emotionally, venting, sharing feelings and empathising with others, encouraging each other on Teaching Experience, through exams and through personal crises.

However, the closed-group was a tutorial group at the WSoE and, consequently, students also used the space for informal discussion of learning experiences such as Teaching Experience, offering advice on lessons and classroom management, assignments and examinations, discussing important issues such as the teachers’ strike, the campus-based programme, the research report, the digital portfolio, their digital status, asking for help and understanding key concepts.

## **CRITICAL LITERACY: POWER, ACCESS, DIVERSITY AND DESIGN ON FACEBOOK PAGES**

The closed-group tutorial Facebook pages appropriate a literacy practice that students normally use for pleasure. Familiarity with the literacy practice creates a safe space within the academy where students can network informally with each other and find support socially, emotionally and academically in peer interaction. Establishing a safe space where students or learners can take risks is an important educational principle (Krashen, 1989). These closed group Facebook pages created a safe space for my students, a space where affective filters are lowered, allowing identity in, fostering a strong group identity and close interpersonal relationships. The sense of safety came from changes in power relationships, providing access that encouraged all students to

participate, allowing students to draw from their diverse discourses and informal codes and valuing the creativity and innovation of their design (writing).

## Power

### *Changing the power in relationships*

Closed-group Facebook pages change the power dynamics between students and tutors. Each tutor controls the power dynamics and the safety of the space on their pages. Looking across tutor pages in *New Literacies for Teachers*, the perception of safety can be seen in the number of members in the closed group, the number of wall posts, the kinds of interactions and codes used, the extent of self-disclosure and the availability of the tutor. If the tutor really believes that social networking with students in this space is important, that tutor will do what they can to create a space where students feel comfortable and excited about joining the group. The data makes it quite clear that the students were delighted to have this literacy practice, which is usually associated with other pleasures, appropriated for communication in this course:

- gosh i am finaly here this seems like a nice pg to state yr mind, grt staff [stuff]
- im really gona miss this group nd being able to interact with the group via this page....
- Wooohoooo im in!! now apart of this CrAZY N.L group.. Hello all u LoveLy people :) :) wow don even no y im on FB----> got sooooo much work for nxt week!
- its my 1st tym wrtng on my nift group pge and am so over da moon with excytmnt.i love u all guys hve a wondrful weeknd nd enjoy
- Thnx guys 4 accepting me, is my plture [pleasure]. I hv bn dying 2 joing de group.
- Hey EDUCATORS!i have finaly got the courage 2 write something.it feels so good
- it fls so great 2 b finali part of th NLFT facebuk famly.

Students feel comfortable in this space, because Facebook is one of their dominant out-of-school literacy practices and they easily transfer this out-of-school literacy practice into the schooled space of the closed-group tutorial pages:

- Hi there:) i think that this last semester has been one of the best coz we were asked to use facebook, something which i already did so that was cool

Some tutors feel less comfortable in this space because they are not used to communicating with students in this way and the space is foreign. Even those tutors who use Facebook are not sure that they want to share this space with students. This alone tips the balance of power. One student, whose tutor didn’t see the point of using the Facebook page, expressed his own discomfort:

- wow ...nt sure if il feel comfortable in here

We build relationships through solidarity-building interaction, disclosure, compliments and expressions of affection (Ellison et al., 2007; Holmes, 1992; Lampe et al., 2007; Livingston, 2008; Mazer et al., 2007). Closed-group Facebook pages foster relationship building which contributes to the safety of the space, participation and learning. When tutors make themselves available to students, communicate with them and engage in solidarity-building interaction, the power shifts. Students often respond well to this. I was surprised and warmed by the response I got to this post in the third week of teaching in 2011:

**Jean Reid:** Hi everyone. Tomorrow I am going to work at home on an academic article about facebook for publication. I have very tight deadlines. So the Prof is going to stand in for me and teach you in the tut. She helped design this module and is very good with mindmaps and graphic organisers. I hope you enjoy her. I will see you all on Monday and we will talk more about your assignment. I will miss u all!

- ahhh, hpe xez as dwn as u. We’r gna miss u 2, i knw i m. Oh nd i wud lve 2 read ur article.
- we gna miss u ms jean cry cry and look forward to read ur articl :)
- I wil ms u2 miss. We r crying indid . Bt i am glade yo btful article wll encourage us in our subject.
- Jean Reid thnks! :)
- its kwl but I ll miss u coz I enjoy being taught by u
- today just wont be the same without you.

A second year methodology student, who had used the NLFT group page in 2010, was helping me to set up a closed-group page that some glitch wouldn’t allow me to do. These posts show an awareness of how Facebook changes interpersonal dynamics between student and tutor, makes learning fun and has the potential for developing interpersonal relationships:

**Zaheera:** oh no problem :) anytym :) anything to make learnin fun... while doing this i actually relaised that i hardly know the people in our method class.... hopin this will change it...

**Jean Reid:** and how many different ways have we communicated? I have also learnt! lets get the group up and going and have some good times in spite of friday afternoons!

**Zaheera:** plenty :) its amazing hey.... just never thought that il ever b chattin to a university tutor over fb ;) soundz like a great idea lets hope wel all be interactive in this group :) thanx Ms. Jean :)

**Jean Reid:** well i never thought i would be chatting to a student so late at night - but thats what I find so interesting bout fb - it changes all the power dynamics - and there are some lecturers who are really not comfortable with that

**Zaheera:** haha to our surprise :) yeah that is true some are very conserved [conservative] and keep it as a teacher learner relationship. sooner or later to[you] eventually become afraid to view ur opinion .... talking from experience....

### ***Changing the power of the discourse***

Encouraging students to use their own codes shifts the balance of power. Tutors have to learn to crack these new codes and this makes them the learners rather than the teachers. Note the responses to this post, particularly the one from the tutor:

**Mary:** Dear Young Uns

For the benefit of us old ones who no longer wear any street cred, might I ask that you use slightly longer, fuller words which the rest of us non-text speakers might be able to understand without short circuiting ye olde grey matter.

Kind regards

Signed  
Grumpy (not so, but aspiring to be) Old Woman

2 people like this.



- **Sarah:** Never fear, I can’t understand half of it either :D
- **Razeenah:** No problem i can try doing that. and i can teach u the short cuts to.
- **Tutor** LOL. No, sorry Mary, it’s up to us 2 learn 2 txt in this space.
- **Mary:** Dem new litracyz hv me by d shor’ ‘n curlyz. Dang.
- **Shirley:** hahaha mary you’re so funny!
- **Tebogo:** Made ma day.....

This post reveals how power dynamics shift between students as well. The student who says she can’t understand half of it either, Sarah, is an English-speaking student. Usually they have the power in face-to-face discussions and often in written assignments because of their proficiency in English. On this page we find students from different cultures, races and religious beliefs chatting freely with each other. It seems much easier to cross these divides on the Facebook page (diversity).

### Access

All students at WSoE have **physical access** to computers and access to Facebook on campus during the day. Many of them have access via laptops and cellphones. Via their closed-group Facebook pages, students have direct access to help and support from other students and from their tutor and may get responses to questions relatively quickly if the tutor visits the page regularly.

#### *Access to students’ language*

In academic spaces the purpose of communication is for academic learning; the discourse is formal, academic and governed by all the conventions and norms for academic literacy. *New Literacies for Teachers* provides access to academic literacy during the lectures and the tutorials. In the course notes, acquiring academic and research literacies is carefully scaffolded. In order to be successful at university students need to master these discourses.

Janks (2010) raises the question “How does one provide access to dominant forms, while at the same time valuing and promoting the diverse languages and literacies of our students in the broader society?” (Janks, 2010, p. 24). Closed-group Facebook pages provide a balance in the academic domain, a space where academic literacy is not the dominant discourse but where students can draw from their own literacy practices and discourses. This addresses the “access paradox” (Janks, 2004).

Many first-year students have heightened affective filters when they first come to university, because they are not sure of themselves or their abilities. This is particularly true of students who are not first-language speakers of English and are often construed in deficit ways. In formal lectures and tutorial spaces, many of these students are too intimidated to make their voices heard and often don’t participate as a result. There are also high-achievers who don’t participate easily due to shyness. When we engage in solidarity-building interaction, the power shifts between student and tutor, and between students, and we lower affective filters and create safe spaces where students can speak freely, take risks and be comfortable with errors (Krashen, 1989). Allowing students to write in their own codes frees them from the constraints of academic discourse, and many students who don’t participate in class become active on the group wall. Facebook provides access for broader student participation.

In the data, most students have used an informal code, a form or “txtng”. Some students have chosen to write more formally, often in full sentences, showing a desire for grammatical correctness – this was often the case for home-language, English-speaking students, who didn’t use elaborate coding systems. The other students all seem very at home with all kinds of “txtng”. I encouraged students to use codes that they were comfortable with. I made it clear that formal grammar and spelling didn’t count. I even left my own spelling errors uncorrected:

- **Mary-Jane:** Gosh - my spelling was shocking in my previous message - sorry - but I am sure you can make out what I meant :)
- **Jean Reid** thats the beauty of facebook! this is an informal space and spelling doesnt count! its the message thats important.
- **Jean Reid:** So welcome to S and M - we have quite a conversatong going!
- **Jean Reid** and as u c i also make spelling mistakes!  
3 people like this

Establishing safety in the code is important to broaden access. It lets identity and voice in, frees students from anxiety and allows them to feel at home in the domain – it is one of the key features of the domain of social networking. I promoted access and established safety in the code by: using coding practices myself; exploring how coding works by using Crystal’s concept of internet linguistics; valuing the creativity of the codes that students use and getting them to think how this constructs their identity; focusing on and using the values of the domain and trying to understand how these “control” or affect the codes used.

### *Access to participation*

The closed-group Facebook pages provided access for more people or different people to participate. People who don’t normally say anything in class often came online to say something. Many students who are more reticent in the face-to-face context of the tutorial class participate actively on the closed-group Facebook wall. One student felt that it’s easier to write on the wall than to talk to people in person:

- Its quite simpl. Da nxity level is much lowa wen ritin...pepil xpres demself beta wen ritin insted of havin 2 awkwadly aproach anotha peson.

Another student, a new first year in NLFT 2011, eventually made a post on the wall in the fifth week of the year:

- **Nomfundo:** HI EDUCATORS! i am sori it took me forever to say something about myself. i dont know what to say...well here goes. i can speak ALL the 11 official lingoz(languages) excluding afrikaans, sepedi, setswana, siswati, xitsonga, xivenda& sindebele. OK...OK...OK... i can only speak 4! i’d love to learn afrikaans, italian and french.I am a kasi(township) girl, i love amaskopas/amakikip (i dont know what they r called in english) ,kota(bunny chow) shisanyama(braai). I am extremely SHY &i love science!
- **Jean Reid:** thnks Nomfundo! I love the SA names. if u are shy is it easier to sy something on this wall than in class?
- **Nomfundo:** ja its much easier.its mo comfortable here!

This post shows how this shy student managed to make jokes on the page and design a code that speaks to her own diversity.

Another student, Sherry, who was also quiet and shy in class, came to life on the Facebook page. It was the first time she had used Facebook and she was a very active

participant. She felt that the “social” distance allowed her to overcome her shyness and make some real connections with her classmates:

- Well i thawt bout it again & i think its the distance dat makes it so addictive. Mst of da tym its an anonymous ting goin on, u dnt knw if ppl r rly who dey say dey r, u jus go wit it. If u do knw da ppl, its mre of a im free ting goin on. Ova fb dez no xpectations rly, u cn say wat u want, wen u want & hw u want. Face2Face u gota watch ur wrds, body language, etc. Its a complicated thing. Oh, n on fb u get 2chat 2ppl ud neva approach face2face 4sum reasn or da uda

In this class, at the end of the year, we took a vote, and two girls (Fatima and Sherry) won the award for “txt queens” (design) of the year and were presented with gilded crowns to wear. Afterwards Sherry made this post:

Reflection...Had a fantaBulous time wit da currB group, i rly njoyd evry moment. I learnt alot thruout da yr & dis fb group has rly helpd me open up mre. Got2knw sum of u guys & it makes it so much easier 2talk 2u now, so thanx, lol. Ima drama queen.. Ooh wee thanx ms Jean, many thanx, ja\*.. c, Liz taught me ietsie nxa, lol. Wel i hope u guys stil gonna drop in nw & then so i cn get 2knw u all so dat il feel more comfy talkin 2u in person.. u guys r jus supalicious, bt lemme nt get al mushy nw, lol gotta prep 4Afr njoy.

This post demonstrates how Facebook allows students to build relationships across social differences (diversity). This particular student had remarkable proficiency in English and often scored in the nineties for assignments, but was too shy to contribute in class. According to her own reflection, she overcame this shyness through Facebook. She went on to become close friends with some of the other students in the class, from different cultures, joining their personal Facebook pages and interacting with them with warmth and affection. The benefits of developing interpersonal relationships within tutorial groups in the first two years of a four-year degree should not be underestimated.

Again we notice the interdependence of power, access, diversity and design.

### ***Access to express personal feelings***

The closed-group pages provide opportunities for students to express things they would not normally express face-to-face and certainly not in a tutorial group. The informal nature of the page gives students access to voicing their opinions and feelings freely. They feel safe enough in this space, if the tutor has made an effort to make them feel safe, to make personal disclosures, voice frustrations, cry for help and also share excitement.

Students shared the crises they experienced on Teaching Experience in a brutally honest way:

- had a bad day--at school very bad--- cried in the staffroom
- People my first dae was horable, i felt like im lost. Kid are misbehavng, they dn't respect their teachers the just do nusty thing i wish it was my last dae guys im stressed. hope u guys enjoid
- Should i quit??? feel like it though...i need to make a difference in this country...so NO
- i had a very terriable day i was so tired and had to teach all day
- My 2nd TE is not tht bad since am able 2 wake up in da morning without crying this is big achievement 4 me n primary schoolars are much better than high schoolars am thinking of changing nw high schoolars will eat me alive

- I hav had it wit T.E! Im counting da days, No make dat hours. This skul made T.E, an up hill battle 4us!

But the group page was also a place where students could share their joys and successes:

- 2dae i was teachin n my lesson went very well in fact it was on fire i needed a fire extinguisher 2 cool da learners down if u knw wht i mean even my tutor was Very impressed hope u enjoy T.E guys
- My final crit was superb
- I am loving teaching experience and having so much fun! I hope everyone is enjoying it as much as i am :)

## Diversity

Closed-group Facebook pages provide opportunities to include students’ own language and literacy practices. They are encouraged to use code-switching (into other languages and provide translations where they think it necessary) and to use their own “txt” coding practices. On the Facebook pages, students construct their different identities through the codes they use and what they say (design). They communicate freely with their classmates and cross racial, cultural, religious and gender boundaries.

### *An invisible space that makes people visible*

Closed-group Facebook pages are an invisible, virtual space that makes people more visible. Students start to realise that they don’t know each other’s names and as they get to know each other’s names and a bit about their classmates, they start moving across the differences that separate them. In all of my closed-group tutorial pages, students were excited to get access to the page and believed that getting to know their classmates was an important process.

A: WOW i’ve realzd 2dy tht i dnt knw my classmates names....i thnk its tym 4me 2learn thm....hv a gr8 T.E. MY PPZ

B: I know hey.. its pretty bad actually!!

C: ahhh buddy...i think i realised the same thing. eish, ons moet meer vriendelik wees.

In 2011, we began the NLFT course with introductory activities, where students memorised each other’s names in a round robin, interviewed each other, introduced the interviewee to the class and wrote paragraphs about each other. My tutorial group drew inferences on what this meant for the tutorial group, for their participation and their learning, and what value these kind of activities would have for teachers. I opened the closed-group Facebook page in the first week of the year and students began joining up immediately. I encouraged them to come online and tell us something about themselves. Perhaps because of the formal “getting to know you” activities, and perhaps because Facebook is ideal for this kind of activity, their first posts were detailed, informative and involved quite a bit of self-disclosure. Here are a few examples:

**Mary-Jane:** hey everyone,

so i decided to take the plunge and be the first to write on the wall...

I am 21 years old, i studied a BA at Wits (main campus) for 3 years and i majored in Psychology and Anthropology. I am graduating in April - exciting times ahead :-) I never really enjoyed my BA as i felt like there was something else out there for me, but decided to complete it anyway so I have no regrets (especially considering the fact that I will one day have 2 degrees behind my name) :-) so far, I am LOVING my BEd!! I finally feel like i am doing something that I am passionate about! i feel complete!

I also need to point out that I am Type 1 diabetic - so please do excuse me if i eat in class - sometimes I might have a sugar low and need food to get me to feel “normal” again - i know that one of the group’s rules stated “no eating in class” but i am sure you can understand...

I am Portuguese and come from a very traditional and strict family where the emphasis is on FOOD and FAMILY and RELIGION...you can never have enough!! i could not have dreamt of a more perfect upbringing....

Every year in the June/July holidays we visit most of my family that are living in Madeira Island and Portugal.

ANYway, i hope I didn’t bore you with my life story.... enjoy your evening :-)

**Peter:** aloha guyz. Here’s a litle abt me- m 18 nd blve it or nt, m frm a plce cald nobody in limpopo.

M a bit shy bt i tlk a lot arnd ppl m usd 2 nd kinda wierd cuz m allergic 2 a lot of thngs.

I hve dis passion 4 english literature, i do a litle bit of writin myslf nd i recently startd writin poetry.Nd my scnd lve is science, i enterd da eskom Science expo 3 tyms in high skul nd i managed 2 gt 2 da nationals in 2009 wer i gt bronze. Well i thnk dats enough 4 nw. Oh nd m lovin my N L F T Class

**Asmaa:** HEY GUYS i dnt knw wat to say kinda blnk lol .ok im 18 and live in lenasia .I was nervous first week of camps cz i was scard id gt lost .I love reading and writing down my feelings .i am also a prof model and dancer .My names comes from arabic lang meanin knowledge and i beliv that family time is important in ones life :)

**Thoko:** i been tryna figure owt xactly what i want to say abt myself here and its bn quite a task cuz i fl like im so complex. anyway, it fls so great 2 b finali part of th NLFT facebuk famly. im al th way 4rm rndfntein and i travel 2 wits evryday so plz xcuse me if i fal aslp in th tut coz travlng cn b xhaustng lol. i c myslf as an artist i draw and paint and write poetry. even tho i hvnt had th chanc 2 xplore my art mo in dtail.4 as lng as i cn remembr ive always wntd 2 bcme a teachr bt nw that im here im gettng cold feet, im vry nervous abt TE.i fnshd matric last year and i tel u unvrsty has bn intimid8tng! i could go on and on and on bt i dnt want 2 bore u so ill end rite here.

**Bongani:** hie guys . i am from katilehong. i hope ur guyz saw my story frm e newsprr (vuvuzela) this week. for me to be honest I don’t enjoy learning education coz I don’t hv passion for it my father forced me to do it . actually I don’t like it. my dream is to become an accountant not a teacher. bt I will try to put my heart to it so dat I do well @ the end of the year. but NLFT is interesting 4 me

This was a multicultural group of male and female students. Note their honesty in admitting to being shy and weird (male), nervous, scared and lost (female), falling asleep, getting cold feet, finding varsity intimidating (female), and not enjoying learning education (male). These posts address diversity, access and design.

### ***Crossing race, culture and gender boundaries***

According to research done at the University of Texas, “There is a noteworthy difference in orientation in how to use a tool like Facebook. We found that for women the content tends to be more affectionate, and (they) are especially interested in using it for connection...For men, it’s more functional” (Debusmann, 2010, November, 23).

These findings are in line with sociolinguistic research on the patterns of male and female interaction. Holmes (1992) outlines the different goals that men and women have in friendly interaction. Women are co-operative conversationalists who are more affectively oriented and for them “the goals of interaction are solidarity stressing, maintaining good relationships” (Holmes, 1992, p. 329). Men, on the other hand, are more referentially oriented, competitive and less supportive of others.

On the closed-group pages, there is cross gender and cross-cultural interaction. This is often very different from the gender patterns in same-sex communication. Gender stereotypes in interaction are overthrown as males express their insecurities, rally to the support of others and express affection.

These posts, expressing intense insecurity, are all from male students:

- i’m nt ok i fil lyk quitting i’m left wt 2 examz ems n studies on de same day. im faling apart.
- Helo everyone,eish what a hectic start for the exams... life studies ah ah ah. truly speaking guys im sinking this year n dont know wats wrong\*sad\*. any advise 4 wat to do especially 4 de curriculum B?
- u r not alone in dis boat im also scared dat i might b exclude dis year bt let us hope 4 de best

These posts, expressing affection, are also from male students:

- i love u all guys hve a wondrful weeknd nd enjoy
- ahhh, hpe xez as dwn as u. We’r gna miss u 2, i knw i m. Oh nd i wud lve 2 read ur article.
- I wll ms u2 miss. We r crying indid . Bt i am glade yo btful article wll encourage us in our subject.
- its kwl but I ll miss u coz I enjoy being taught by u
- Miss u it’s not the same now that u gone

Self-disclosures evoked sympathy and solidarity from others in the class, often from unexpected sources. These posts are also from male students:

- Sorry gae, only jus been on fb on... Ah sorry my man but least it’s over now, and i’m sure u studied hard for both... Have a good break Siphos take it easy:-)
- **Zwelakhe:** And believe in yourself, u gonna be fine just have some faith... If u made it this far u can do anything
- Wow! Its kinda diffict2 feel positive in such a stressful environment bt keep ur head up it will get bettr eventually...
- **Zwelakhe:** u are a soldier ma frd ,pull up yr sock and show them whoses bossss
- A journey of a thousand miles started with only 1 step, even Barak was once a student. we r only left with few hours before we start writing, gud luk.

Here is a male student who was having difficulties coping with examination pressures while his mother was ill. He got sympathy and support from fellow students on Facebook, this time from male and female classmates:

A: IM HAVING PROBLEMS AT HOME, MY MOM IS SICK. GOD HELP HER. DONT DO THIS TO ME DURING THE EXAM TIME.  
 B: i wish her better and you strength☺  
 C: i hope she gets well soon...uzoba[you will be] strong:)  
 D: We behind u...hope she gets wel  
 A: thank you guys  
 E: she's in my prayers...

Cross cultural communication also happens with a lot more ease than it does in the tutorial class itself, and students often interact with students from other cultures. This exchange is particularly interesting. Daniella is a white female student and Zwelakhe is an African male student from a township near Johannesburg. The students did not know each other very well and hadn’t worked together or had personal contact in class. Facebook cuts across cultural and gender boundaries. Zwelakhe often came online to encourage other students.

**Daniella** is having a difficut time at the school kids are smart...cannot find questions that they dnt knw the answers too...then two teachers speak behind my back...Say it to my face feel so intimidated at this point in time...feel like quitting...i dnt really wana be a teacher but an educational pyschologist...

- **Jean Reid** I am really sorry you having such a rough time. Its not supposed to be like that. hang in there. some sympathy and encouragement from the rest of you?
- **Daniella:** no thanks i dnt like sympathy
- **Zwelakhe:** gal If God sends us on strong paths, we are provided strong shoes, thz r the signs tht shows u r goi..2b a vry gud teacher or edu pyc...be strong and alwys knw tht we r wt u!!! al the tyms
- **Zaheera:** ola, u know wat use this as a learnin curve. it might not be the best experience, but it is certainly one to learn from

On a colleague’s page, students discussed racial thinking in response to a newspaper report the tutor posted:

- **Tutor:** Jansen says in this article: “If there is one place in South Africa where students can and should unlearn racial thinking about others, it is on the university campus”. What do YOU think?
- **Nokuthula:** well it’s true what Jansen says university life it’s a place were u learn unity, cause u see different pple & learn more about their culture,without any racial issues.
- **Mary:** Although I do not think that Wits education campus represents that ideal. It’s very much about clique-formation and any interaction seems superficial, confined only to the classroom with its demands of civility
- **Thandi:** But hopefully its up to us as grown nd matured beings to overcome and celebrate our diversity sometimes it happens quicker than others.. While otha pple take time 2 adjst.. It has nthng 2 do wit being in university
- **Razeenah:** we c dat during brk indians sit wit indians,colourds wit colourds,white wit white n blak wit blak. yes u do learn abt ada culture n group n do talk 2 other race bt wen it cums 2 choosing friends in university,its on a different level hey.

Mary points out that cross-cultural interaction is confined to the classroom and Razeenah comments on how students group themselves outside the classroom. On the Facebook page, these divisions often fall away and cross cultural communication happens easily.

## Design

The closed-group Facebook pages provide a dynamic, new platform for learning in that students get to redesign or reform their understanding of concepts in their own codes. Students wrote freely about their learning tasks, assignments and exam equivalents in a relaxed and informal way, engaging in collaborative learning.

### *Informal discussions of learning tasks or experiences*

In *New Literacies for Teachers*, 2010, students were given an examination equivalent at the end of the year in the form of a digital portfolio. There were some very mixed feelings about the digital portfolio. It was on the Facebook page that they “chatted” about how they were doing on the examination equivalent, how they were experiencing the blog and how they felt about it (access and design):

- this is amazing ppl are just so excited abt this exam equivalent...and im just NOT, in fact im dying...i cant wait for this whole thing to be over \*sad\*
  - u knw wht cne..i cudnt have said it beta myself..!
  - gal, u a not alone, i wish that i cud pay sum1 2 do it on my bhlf. what the hyperlink all abt? Eish, jaa nee!!!! studying!!!!just trauma!!!
- I’m so sick of technology it’s not even funny. Damn NLFT =)
  - Lmfao,im happy with it and enjoying it ,as i dont have internet at home.i wish we could have started with this course begin of the year .
  - lolisto,,,,,M i get ur point
  - dat make d 2 of us M
  - I think m addicted to technology...can't imagine spending a month without my pc!

However, many students were really excited about the digital portfolio and expressed this excitement on their Facebook pages:

- Wrote on the blog yesterday, was gr8 fun.. interested to c every1s view points.. “Facebook Suicide” is such a relevant topic to all of us... :):):)
- IGNITE...power to the comrades!
- really enjoying exam equivalent 2... in my element doing the powerpoint presentation lol (~~,) ♥
- ola everyone...i was jus on the blog and my goodness i was having fun replying to posts and reading everyones opinions on the different articles. i hope everyone had as much fun as i did
  - 5 people like this.
  - tjo... im also having quite abit of fun... it was quite entertaining at first and than i realised the academic point of it..

This kind of free communication about learning tasks gives tutors a very good indication of where their students are and which students need help. It also provides informal feedback on the task and how students are managing it (design, diversity, access).

### *Redesigning concepts in their own codes*

In these extracts, posted during an examination equivalent (a take-home paper where students have to apply their knowledge), the students redesign their learning in their own codes. Notice how Fatima “talks” her own way through her understanding of “a balanced approach” and the features of non-fiction books with some help from other group members:



**Fatima** Hi Hi evry1! Atm in fln terrible cz i soooo dnt undrstnd our exam Equiv :( N im sur il B failn it miserably. Wish we spnt mre tym in clas discusn process writn N hw 2 teach a non-fiction buk ... Nehu best of luck 2 Evry1! Hope Ur findn da exm equiv a lot easir dan I am... L8rZ!

- **Elizabeth** i agree my girl:( and the foundations for learning is killing me as well...i dnt see anything that relates to the balanced approach???

**Fatima** Hi Hi! Does any1 hav a cook’n clue wat da balanced approach is all abt???

PIZ leme knw iv lukd N lukd N cudn find nil abt it. MwaZ!

- **Zakiyyah** the balanced approach begins wit kidz emergent literacy, involves readin n ritng 4 genuine purposes n att 2 phonics n meanin, which also gives them techniques n strategies 2 unlock code of written word. Mwah! hope u njoyin tis coz i aint!
- **Fatima** ThnX my swty bt wher in dis world did U find dat????
- **Zakiyyah** its in the original ncs eng hme lang
- **Fatima** ThnX babe il go chk it out
- **Zakiyyah** np hun!njy

**Fatima** MorNiN :) ... Ok so lukd up da balanced approach N it deals wid combine’n ALL da approaches 4 both readn N writn so dat nt nly 1 approach is implemented N dat der learners hav a ‘balance’ of all of dem. N heres sumtn dat myt hlp- In our red buks (wk14) da v v last pge (14 N 15) it givs da featres of a non-fiction buk so dat myt cum handy wen doin sect C.

In *New Literacies for Teachers* 2010 tutorial groups discussed the concepts of digital natives, immigrants, voyeurs and refugees (Brown & Czerniewicz, 2010; Prensky, 2001). On the Facebook pages students redesigned these concepts in their own codes, making sense of them in their own lives and worlds. They talked about their own digital status quite freely, referring to Prensky’s metaphor, sometimes redesigning their own metaphors:

- by d wy u gys, im digtall refugi...am i on way 2 joining d immigrants? natives fil us in. sum of us r jus digtly impaired....phisically and emosnali. wat bot those who r addicted to digital prgrammes...cnt we cum up wit a name for dem lyk...get bac 2 u bout dt..toodles....
- Its weird though that we are taught digital literacies by ppl who are not “digital natives”
- guys did yall c how much work our 2nd assignment is? yoh yoh yoh...i feel sorry 4 ol the digital refugees out there... if only there were extra lessons on how 2 do a powerpoint presentation.
  - i can give extra lesson at a low fee of ....R5 an hour! here are my numbers
  - stop fooling around. Lol @ N al da refuges r gona start tinkng of going back c their easy lyf @ home or wish they were clued up. Lets say a litle pray 4 al (refuge 2 native)
  - are u a refugee? hahahaha whr is the passport!? lol
  - Tutor N, there should be help in the computer rooms - just start early and do a bit each day.
- hey im with u jacq anitivi whr to start really im always trying to start but i cant get it right pls guys help us with dis 1 we voyeur’s really need ur help pls...
- I’ve decided I’m not so much a digital immigrant as a Digital Duck! I love the technology, can get along swimmingly – on the surface. Underneath, I’m frantically paddling to keep up, and there are definitely deeper waters I don’t venture into...
- I’m a digital Shark. eagerly anticipating the latest news and reviews on the latest gadgets and programs. and when i smell my prey, I attack! Yet, Im very cautious of tricksters on the net. These fisherman are very cunning! spreading Viruses and worms! they leak onto my sea, disaster and fear. this is

why many of my fellow brothers and sisters stay away and become refugees and voyeurs

These posts show how students have internalised these concepts, using them to apply to their real life situations in meaningful ways. They are ready to own their own digital status, extend the metaphors in amusing ways and even create their own metaphors about it. The metaphor of the “digital duck” came from a tutor and was one that many tutors could relate to. The metaphor of the “digital shark” was from a multilingual student who demonstrates a voracious eagerness for all things digital, but also an acute awareness of the “tricksters” that create fear in others.

### ***Constructing identity through designing codes***

Facebook provides access for students to engage in critical literacy activities where they reflect on how the way they write on the page constructs their identities and diversity. In my second-year language methodology class (2009), the students did a portfolio task where they reflected on how their classmates constructed their identities on the wall and how they constructed their own through the codes they designed. The students showed amazing insights into their own and other students’ use of language and how their coding practices work. Here are some extracts from their portfolio tasks.

Sherry about herself

My way of texting depends largely on the way I usually speak with my friends at home. Most coloureds who grow up speaking Afrikaans and English usually text this way. I don’t focus so much on the individual letters and sounds but rather more on how the words sound when they are spoken out loud in order to make meaning and because of this, my spelling of the same word might not always be identical. I text freely thus indicating that I am a free person who loves wandering around, someone who likes breezing through life’s journey. I’m also quite bubbly when I’m with close friends and family and I love exaggerating. Since I speak both Afrikaans and English, and love both my languages so much, I often mix the two to add a kick. **My voice screams through my text**, showing that I am someone who sometimes likes being spontaneous and just living in the moment. I also stress and complain a lot (whenever given the chance) but in the end I always laugh it off.

In a personal message to me via Facebook, Sherry made the following observations about her texting practices. It is interesting to compare what she says in the more formal portfolio task with the way she expresses herself in this message. The message is actually a demonstration of the coding practices she is talking about (design):

- Mrnin mam.How u?Wel,u’ll find dat many of da coloureds 4rm Ennerdale & Eldos txt dis way,duno y though.Ive jus gotten so used 2it & sumtimes i even tune my own language alng da way.Al my frnds txt dis way & many times we even talk dis way.I think u’ll find dat many of da ppl who grew up wit sum afrikaans & den switched 2Eng actually talk & txt dis way.  
Thanx,Enjoy ur day.

Fatima about Sherry:

Quite confident and comfortable using text language ... comes across as being an extrovert. One also gets a sense that she is streetwise, is in touch with slang words and colloquialisms used in the townships, and that she is really not fazed by social conventions... the type of person who will find solace in writing about how she feels

... manages to convey emotion in her writing ... one gets a sense of her frustration and anger.

The codes that Sherry uses show that they are part of her identity as opposed to simply being a time saving device as she uses them constantly throughout the post ... she uses a lot of slang phrases, not just the odd word the way some of the others do.

Sherry about Fatima

Fatima’s texting style really surprised me because she chats like a coloured girl. Her texts are fun and easy on the eye although it can sometimes be quite difficult to interpret so you’ve always got to read between the lines. This shows that she’s really quite a complicated person and very unpredictable so you’ve got to be careful not to make a fool of yourself. Fatima uses a lot of symbolic language and she focuses heavily more on sounds (how the letter itself sounds and how it would sound in a particular word). She seems like a bubbly, energetic and fun person who is very outspoken and confident. However, at the same time she also sounds like someone who’s very impatient and quite short-tempered – her sentences are barely sentences, just words and letters dancing around and jumping all over the place and she also uses lots of punctuation marks in between.

Others about Fatima:

a very linguistically creative person... adventurous with words ... not restricted by grammatically correct language

Fatima is a risk taker ... gives one the sense that Fatima will write as she is thinking... she must be quite social and has a wide circle of friends who share her interest of facebook. **I think that when there is no convention for a word, i.e. a code for a word, Fatima will not hesitate to make up a code to suit the context.**

I really liked reading the wall posts which Fatima placed on the facebook wall... they actually reminded me of exactly the way she speaks ...she speaks very informally and in an abbreviated way ... Fatima is a quirky type of person and I feel you are able to see this through her writing.

Her text is lengthy so one could assume that she loves talking.

She uses capital letters in such a way that they emphasize the words, making it as though you can actually hear her talking through the writing.

I think Fatima reveals her young, funky side because she expresses herself through a lot of abbreviations and codes.

The next post shows how comfortable the students are on Facebook and using “txtese”. It also demonstrates how they value the creativity in texting styles and how these designs construct identity:

- **Mandla:** Yoe ma’am, u askd wetha ur textin is getin beta rite? Wel, i dont tink dat dere is sumtin lyk da ideal textin styl...U rite in a way dat u feel expreses u ...but personaly i tink dats its beta 2b uniq...Mak yr textin EXCLUSIVE. Owdi!!!!

The kind of texting code you use is a strong identity marker (diversity and design). Using innovative codes seems to say: I am with it, cool, young (or older depending on your particular code), I am techno savvy, educated, upwardly mobile (I have access to a cell phone or a computer), I am connected, I have friends and we use an in-group

variety or code, I am open to change, I can be creative with language, I can “talk the talk”. And if you don’t switch to “digital speak”, that also says something very strong about your identity. It may indicate that you are a linguistic purist; that you are afraid of being misunderstood; that you like to use formal, correct English in any written form of communication; that you are old-fashioned and traditional; that you don’t like to use slang; or that you are against language change and innovation.

An important part of the NLFT course is reading for pleasure. In this post the students discuss their own reading experiences, quite uninhibited by concerns for formal English, the dominant discourse, or the necessity to appear diligent or in control of their reading. Again their writing is so honest.

- C: guys my book is so big i dnt knw if im gнна b dne readin it by jnu or any tym dis year,lol, mayb on my 4th year if possible my 1st workig year b4 i get my 1st salary,thn i wil teach my students about it.u knw guys its my 1st tym wrtng on my nift group pge and am so over da moon with excytmnt.i love u all guys hve a wondrful weeknd nd enjoy.
- B: Lmao siphо hai. I dnt like my buk at all S its veri sexually explicit so i thnk ima chnge it siphо and i wil c u at ur offic ms jean lol...
- A: wagagagagagagagaga. . . siphо. . ay ngeke mfethu. .ungihlekiselani kdwa. [oh never brother, you mustn’t make me laugh so] . lol. . y did u tke dat buk in d 1st place.. lolest. .gagaga. . @B. u cn gv d one u r reading 2me. we wl exchange. n then il read dt one b4 i start on d other 1 i took. cz i hd taken 2 buks. . i thnk ur’s sounds interesting. .\*winking n blushing\*

Notice that student B is quite willing to admit that she doesn’t like her book because of the sexual explicitness, and student A is equally willing to admit that she would like to read it for that very reason. They are constructing their own identities through the codes they design and the content of their writing. The page provides access for the “gent”, student C, to joke about how he is overcome by the sheer size of his book. He is also the one who is “over da moon with excytmnt” at being on the group page and doesn’t hesitate to express affection for the group, undermining gender stereotypes. These students are not afraid to draw on their diversity in the way they design their codes. They are confident, without any discussion, that this is acceptable in this space.

## CONCLUSION

Facebook was originally created as a network for college students, but it was most often used as a place to chat about who’s “hot”, what’s “cool” and where the “hip” action is. It has become a popular past time for people from the early teens to old age, a way of staying in touch with family and friends far away, a way of sharing photographs whilst actually on journeys, a way of making friends, keeping in touch and finding out what’s on. This paper looks at how Facebook can be used to add another dimension to belonging to tutorial groups at university, a way of networking with peer groups in spaces where it is safe enough to let your voice be heard. The use of closed-group tutorial Facebook pages fosters an awareness amongst students of the importance of academic networking.

### **The crucial interdependence of power, access, diversity and design**

Throughout the discussion of findings, it has been impossible to talk of one orientation towards critical literacy without the others. The closed-group Facebook pages shift the balance of power between tutors and students and across the students in the class, balancing access to academic discourses with access to the students’ own languages and literacy practices. As they express themselves and talk about their learning through the codes they design, they draw on their own diversity, let identity in and move across racial, cultural and gender boundaries. Using their own language and their own codes, they redesign and reform their learning, letting their own voices be heard and internalising knowledge in their own unique ways. The pages provide students with the opportunity to engage in critical practices in relation to writing.

### **The value of this practice for student teachers**

It is important for teachers to: acknowledge learners’ out-of-school literacy practices; understand how domains govern literacy practices and how technology changes communication; “do” digital literacies rather than teach “about” them; appreciate the diversity of language forms in digital spaces; enable critical practices in relation to writing, giving learners an opportunity to become aware of issues of power, access, diversity and design; and create a safe space for learning. In the same way that closed-group Facebook pages creates a safe space for students, teachers can create a safe space for their learners, bringing social networking into a classroom space where learners can think critically about it.

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