

**Negotiation, participation, and the construction of identities and  
autonomy in online communities of practice: a case study of online  
learning in English at a university in South Africa**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study is located at the interface of online learning within a context of English language studies and academic literacy and is underpinned, from a critical theoretical perspective, by an understanding of the implications of the digital divide for South Africa. The thesis includes an exploration of online learning, as mediated by information and communication technology (ICT), in an undergraduate English language and academic literacy classroom at a university in Johannesburg, South Africa. The study draws on research and theorising by Warschauer (2002a, 2002b, 2003), who argues for the need for technology in developing countries as a means of social inclusion. The aim is to explore the extent to which communities of practice (COPs) are enabled in an online environment, among English non-mother tongue speakers, who have minimal previous access to ICT. To achieve the aim the study examines the extent to which the learners participate, negotiate meaning, construct identities, and perceive themselves as autonomous in online spaces. This is a case study that explores asynchronous ICT practices such as the use of the Internet (Net), e-mail, and discussion threads in an online Web course management system.

From a sociocultural perspective, and recognising that learning does not occur in isolation, the work of Lave and Wenger (1991, 1996, 2002) is used to frame the study, concerned as it is with learning, technology and empowerment. Lave and Wenger (1991, 2002) locate learning as a form of interaction and co-participation, and argue that learning occurs within specific contexts or communities of practice. Thus they focus on how individuals become members of 'communities of practice'. The study suggests that

practice and participation are underpinned, and to some extent determined, by the identities constructed by participants in the online communities. Participants' ICT-practices are examined from the perspective of literacy, in this case electronic literacy, as a social practice and New Literacy Studies, where the work of Gee (1996, 1997, 2000), Street (1984, 1993a, 1993b, 2003), Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic (2000), and Lankshear and Knobel (1997, 2004) are drawn on to examine the use of technology. Constructions of identity are examined from Hall's (1992) post-structuralist view that old identities, which stabilised the social world as we knew it, are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject.

From observations, participant-interviews, questionnaires, written data, and the analysis of messages posted to discussion threads over the duration of a year, the study demonstrates that the online environment facilitates the construction of communities of practice, by enabling participants to develop and sustain local and global relationships, construct identities, and engage autonomously in the medium. My findings suggest that online environments be considered, not merely as alternative modes of delivery in the language classroom, but for social inclusion, provided that facilitators and learners are adequately prepared for the use of digital technology. The study further suggests a model for the adoption of ICT in relation to learning within the South African context.

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**PART 1:**

**Beyond the digital divide: Context, theory, access**

## CHAPTER 1

### The aim and context of the study

#### 1.1 Online communities of practice: An area of research

In a newly democratic South Africa<sup>1</sup> higher education policy documents such as the *Green Paper on Higher Education* (1996), the *White Paper on Education and Training* (1994) and the *Higher Education Act* (1997)<sup>2</sup> recommend the implementation of information and communication technologies (ICT)<sup>3</sup> and resource-based education. However, there is often a mismatch between what is articulated in policy and in its implementation, and the emergence of ICT in social, political, and educational spheres has been met with some ambivalence in South Africa. On one hand, the use of ICT is perceived as enabling developing countries (such as South Africa) to acquire the status of global players, while on the other hand, the lack of infrastructure and resources has a detrimental effect on global participation and development. However, South African researchers and stakeholders in education<sup>4</sup> imply that to withhold new technologies is to marginalise developing countries even further.

Shifts in language teaching and learning pedagogies to incorporate multimedia ICT modes of delivery have introduced change to the South African educational landscape (Kajee, 2005a; Kajee, 2005b). It is inevitable that teachers, to accommodate such shifts, seek new strategies to manage and understand the new modes of delivery. Sometimes

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<sup>1</sup> South Africa attained its democracy in 1994.

<sup>2</sup> At primary and secondary school level, the *Draft White Paper on e-Education* (2004) is relevant.

<sup>3</sup> Definitions of ICT are varied, although it is generally understood by most to encompass electronics and computers. In my study I adopt Gunton's (1993) view of ICT to include electronic technologies that are used to collect, store, process, and communicate information.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Czerniewicz (2004), Czerniewicz and Carr (2005), Czerniewicz and Brown (2005), and Lelliot, Pendlebury and Enslin (2000).

teachers and lecturers<sup>5</sup> resist shifts and feel themselves inadequate and under-prepared (Snyder, 2002; Lam, 2000). This gives rise to questions around how ICT modes of delivery are used in the classroom, as well as how students, particularly those with minimal previous access, position themselves in relation to its use, and make meaning in new online spaces. To address such concerns this introductory chapter provides the aim of my study on online communities of practice, the key questions that framed my methodological approach, as well as the underlying rationale for the study. I situate the study within perspectives of the digital divide, and the English language debates in South Africa. I further locate the study within the African and South African contexts, by focusing on ICT policy, practice and initiatives, with emphasis on higher education. Finally, I establish the framework of the thesis, by providing an outline of the chapters.

My research is an exploration of online learning, as mediated by ICT, in an undergraduate English classroom at a university in Johannesburg, South Africa. The main aim is to explore the extent to which communities of practice are enabled in an online environment, among English non-mother tongue speakers, with minimal previous access to ICT. The use of the case study is appropriate because of its ability to provide an intensive view of the participants as they unravel the complexities of the use of ICT. In my case study I make reference to asynchronous<sup>6</sup> ICT practices such as the use of the Internet (Net)<sup>7</sup>, e-mail<sup>8</sup>, and discussion forums<sup>9</sup> on online Web course management

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<sup>5</sup> Studies in the area focus on teachers and lecturers. I use the terms teachers and lecturers interchangeably in this thesis.

<sup>6</sup> Asynchronous online communication occurs when an initiator may start the communication process, and the respondent may reply at his/her convenience, using, for example, e-mail. Synchronous communication occurs when participants communicate simultaneously in real time, like a conversation, using, for example, chat rooms.

<sup>7</sup> The Internet (Net) is a global network of computers.

systems<sup>10</sup>. From a sociocultural perspective, and recognising that learning does not occur in isolation, this thesis draws on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991, 2002) who, rather than define learning as the acquisition of knowledge, situate it as forms of interaction and co-participation<sup>11</sup>. Wenger (1998), for instance, considers learning to be interactive relationships among people and their environments. Lave and Wenger (1991, 1996, 2002) and Wenger (1998) advocate learning in a specific context, and focus on how individuals become members of 'communities of practice' (COPs). COPs are viewed as sets of relations among people, activities and the world, over time, and in relation to other overlapping COPs (Lave and Wenger, 1991, 1996, 2002; Rogoff, 2003). The emphasis, therefore, is the interconnectedness of people, learning, practice, participation, and the social world. Development occurs as a process where a person gradually increases his/her participation and belonging to society's various communities of practice.

I argue that practice and participation are underpinned, and to some extent determined, by the identities constructed by participants in the online communities. I examine participants' ICT-practices from the perspective of literacy, in this case electronic literacy, as a social practice and New Literacy Studies, where I draw on the work of Gee (1996, 1997, 2000), Street (1984, 1993, 1998, 2003) and Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic

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<sup>8</sup> E-mail, or electronic mail refers to text messages which are sent between computers.

<sup>9</sup> Discussion forums are discussions held online when people with common interests communicate.

<sup>10</sup> Web course management systems software is designed to create and manage online courses, which may be conducted as independent courses, or as in my study, may be conducted parallel to traditional face-to-face courses. In the case of the latter, web courses may be seen as an extension or support effort, with facilitators making course notes, syllabi, glossaries, and extended reading available to students. Please refer also to Muianga's (2005) study of the use of a web course in two Masters courses in Mozambique.

<sup>11</sup> Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning occurs through interaction and participation among learners, who belong to communities of practice.

(2000). I also refer to Lankshear and Knobel (1997, 2004) and Knobel and Lankshear (2002) to examine technological, or electronic literacies<sup>12</sup>.

I explore constructions of identity from Hall's (1992) post-structural view that old identities, which stabilised the social world as we knew it, are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject. With new technologies networking the world, computer-mediated communication (CMC) produces a vast array of virtual communities, which give rise to the construction of virtual identities (Castells, 1996). Thus, technological change should be located in the social context in which it is taking place, and by which it is being shaped.

Finally, I suggest that essential to COPs, is the notion of 'autonomy' or 'self-direction'. Autonomy is a key concept in my study because it is a recurring and prominent characteristic in learning theories, as well as South African educational policies, and has received attention in the research on online learning<sup>13</sup>. Learner autonomy is also regarded as central to lifelong learning, learner-centredness and active learning in South African policy documents such as the *Green Paper on Higher Education* (1996).

My main aim then, is to establish the extent to which COPs are enabled in an online environment, among participants from under-resourced backgrounds, who are relatively new to the use of ICT in the teaching-learning context.

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<sup>12</sup> Morrison (2005) coins the term 'electracies' to refer to multimedia electronic literacies.

<sup>13</sup> For studies in autonomy in online environments, the work of Ying (2002), Kurek (2002), Spratt *et al* (2002) and Toyoda (2001) may be referred to. These studies are examined in more detail in Chapter 3.

For the purpose of my research, I refer to Kearsley's (1998) interpretation of online learning, which he views as any form of learning and teaching that takes place *via* a computer network, bulletin board, the Net, World Wide Web (WWW), local area network (LAN), or intranet. I examine this definition, and others more critically in Chapter 2. In particular, I examine issues relating to how participants interact, develop relationships, construct identities, and the extent to which they exercise autonomy in online spaces. In order to conceptualise, design and initiate a project that explores online communities of practice in the English classroom, questions need to be posed about the use of online technology, as well as the emerging communities of practice, and it is these questions that I attempt to address in the thesis and present in the section to follow.

## **1.2 Questions for research on online communities of practice**

Although ICT-based applications in English language teaching are currently being used sporadically at South African higher education institutions, international studies, such as those by Warschauer (1996a, 1997a, 2000c, 2001, 2004), Mak (1995a, 1995b), Peyton (1990), Marcos (1994), Langston and Batson (1990), and others indicate that the use of ICT and WWW technology, including the Internet, in English teaching opens doors to enhanced teaching and learning experiences. Knobel and Lankshear (2002) for instance suggest that personal computing, the Net, and digital communication media have changed what it means to learn, know and do things. My research focuses more specifically on the extent to which the use of online practices such as the Net, e-mail, and discussion forums on web course management systems facilitate online communities of practice. In order to address the main aim of my research, I ask the question: to what extent do English non-

mother tongue speakers in a university English classroom engage in communities of practice in online spaces?

Recognising that communities of practice encompass negotiation of meaning, participation and the establishment of relationships, all of which are facilitated by the construction of participant-identities, and learner autonomy, I found it necessary to pose further questions:

1. What are the electronic (ICT)-literacy practices of higher education English non-mother tongue speakers, and how do these practices shape their perceptions of ICT-use in an English language classroom?
2. What relationships do the participants develop and sustain in online environments?
3. How do the participants construct identities in online environments?
4. To what extent do participants perceive themselves as autonomous in online environments?

In order to answer the first question, I examine participants' 'in- and out-of-school' electronic literacy practices, with specific focus on ICT, by looking at issues of ICT access, proficiency and their perceptions of the use of technology for the teaching and learning of English. I use the notion 'literacy as social practice' as a lens through which to focus on their home, high school, and university ICT-literacy practices. I draw on Gee (1996, 1997, 2000), Street (1984, 1993, 1998, 2003), Barton *et al* (2000), and Lankshear and Knobel (1997, 2004) who suggest that the conventional meaning of 'literacy' is narrow, and that literacy is a social practice. I expand their views on literacy to include electronic literacy, with specific focus on ICT. To answer the second question, I adopt Rogoff's (2003) and Lave and Wenger's (1991, 2002) concepts of relationships and legitimate peripheral participation, which relate to collaboration and interaction. I employ

Hall's (1992) and Norton (Pierce's) (1995, 1997, 2000)<sup>14</sup> interpretation of identity, self and subjectivity from a post-structural perspective to examine how participants' construct online identities. I then examine in Chapter 6 how participants construct their identities by analysing their discussion forum messages linguistically. I apply a sociocultural framework to look at how their postings position them in relation to key course readings and themes. Finally, the features of autonomy as established by Guglielmino (1977, 1997) and Knowles (1975), are used in my study to address the fourth question on the extent to which participants perceive themselves autonomous in online environments. The features identified by Guglielmino (1977, 1997) and Knowles (1975), as necessary for autonomy include:

- ability to learn on their own as well as in groups,
- ability to derive enjoyment from, and curiosity about learning,
- ability to assume responsibility for learning,
- ability to develop their own ideas,
- ability to address challenges in learning,
- ability to formulate learning goals,
- ability to locate resources,
- ability to use multiple learning strategies,
- ability to retain what they have learnt,
- ability to relate new knowledge to what they already know,
- ability to think critically,
- ability to assess their own progress,
- persistence,
- ability to manage their time well.

The key theories and features presented thus far are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, the theoretical framework. Having presented the broad aim of my study, as well as introduced the key questions I ask in this research, in the section that follows I provide

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<sup>14</sup> Earlier work is attributed to Norton-Pierce (1995), while later works are attributed to Norton (1997, 2000). In her work on language and identity, Norton (1995, 1997, 2000) uses 'identity' to refer to how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future. I found such constructions relevant to participants' online textual presence. Lam's (2000) work on the construction of textual identity on the Net is also referred to.

the underlying rationale for my study on online communities of practice. I rationalise my study from two perspectives, first, ICT inconsistencies created by the notion ‘digital divide’, and second, pertinent English language debates in South Africa.

### **1.3 Providing the rationale of the study**

Current trends in South Africa demonstrate a sporadic, though increasing interest in the use of ICT in teaching and learning. This phenomenon has to do with the lack of resources and insufficient teacher-development in the area of ICT education. This is compounded by the entry of students into the higher education sector who have neither had previous access to ICT, nor share the medium of instruction of the institution, English. Thus I provide the underlying rationale for my study as being juxtaposed with power struggles around issues of ICT access and access to English.

#### *1.3.1 ICT inconsistencies in higher education: Demystifying the digital divide*

Concerns relating to the use of ICT have been examined primarily against the backdrop of the binary view of developing and developed nations. It is usually assumed that what is appropriate in first world countries cannot be adopted in its present condition in developing countries such as South Africa. Warschauer (2002a; 2002b; 2003; 2004b), for instance, cautions against replicating common weaknesses in introducing ICT to developing countries, from an instrumentalist perspective, such as the use of overly-sophisticated technology, and not training teachers and key participants sufficiently in its use. Lelliott, Pendlebury and Enslin (2000) further caution against locating Africa with developed nations when they say “In Africa and the rest of the developing world, patterns

of inclusion and exclusion, empowerment and disempowerment have differed from those of Europe and North America” (2000:42).

It is inevitable that limited access to, and lack of proficiency in, ICT hampers the use of technology. Thus, the digital divide, or separation between ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ is particularly evident in developing countries. However, the notion is somewhat inaccurate because the stratification that exists in relation to access to online information has little to do with ICT, but rather more to do with political, economic, institutional, cultural, and linguistic contexts that shape meaning in people’s lives (Warschauer, 2002a; 2002b; 2004b; 2005, in press). Warschauer therefore considers the notion of the divide “oversimplified” (2003b: Foreword). He emphasises “A consideration of how people can use computers and the Internet to further the process of social inclusion is paramount in any effort to install new technology into an environment lacking in it” (2003a: 44). Thus he sees the divide, or inequality, as social rather than digital. His approach concurs with Feenberg’s (1991) more critical stance that the shaping of technology is related strongly to issues of class and power, and not just to issues of access. Thus, the view that the presence of technology necessarily influences social change is technologically deterministic (Feenberg, 1991; Warschauer, 2002a; 2002b; 2003a; 2003b; 2004b)<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Warschauer (2003a; 2003b; 2004b; 2005, in press) illustrates this with his case study in Egypt where expensive hardware and software was purchased for educational purposes, but remained unused because of the failure to take into consideration the social environments necessary for computer laboratories to be utilised effectively. This, as well as case studies based in India and Ireland, are discussed at greater length in Chapter 2, the theoretical framework.

The use of ICT is both a threat and an opportunity to higher education. The threat appears in the form of widening the digital divide to those who lack power and access to the dominant technological requirements. Its opportunities take on the form of its implications for material and commercial empowerment, where higher-paid jobs and skilled employment will demand its use. Kennard (2001) says:

The issue of access to new technology will also determine the steps of every worker on each rung of the socioeconomic ladder. It is clear that in the next century, those who are literate in computer languages and familiar with new technologies will succeed, and those who are not, will not (2001:196).

The issue of power and access to technology mirrors Bourdieu's (1991) views on the English language debate, where those with access to the English language are in a position of power: they attain material and commercial power because of the access it creates to jobs and eventual economic gain. This results in an access paradox in that the more the English language is used, the greater its symbolic power, while those who do not acquire the language are denied such power (Janks, 2004). The consequence is a double divide.

I suggest that the ICT debate follows similar logic to Bourdieu's (1991) perception of the role of English as a gate-keeping language. In the ICT access debate, those with access to, and proficiency in the use of ICT, attain material and commercial power, as we are reminded by Kennard (2001). The use of ICT perpetuates its power, while those who do not have access and proficiency find themselves marginalized, especially in the higher education sector. Thus, South Africa, like other developing countries, has to position itself in the debate by making conscious choices regarding the use of technology, given that resources and availability are not widespread, nor can be taken for granted.

Conflict surrounding the digital divide in South Africa and Africa at large is evident when one considers the possibilities of *not* implementing technology in educational contexts. Included among the opportunities promised by ICT is that it is able to transcend discrepancies in location, distance, and time. ICT also offers the possibility of lower costs and wider choices, thus providing a lucrative opportunity for empowering stakeholders and making teaching and learning more equitable. With appropriate application, emerging information and communication technologies can therefore help developing countries by enabling educational reform, equity and access (Suwanwala, 2002).

However, current inconsistencies in the use of ICT in higher education in South Africa can conflict with the goals of attaining quality education. There are the two key gaps or ‘silences’ in current ICT endeavors in South African higher education institutions at under-graduate level. First, many students enter higher education institutions from schools that may not have access to ICT, therefore the students cannot cope with the demands of the technological requirements of higher education, where basic computer literacy is taken for granted. Thus students might feel excluded, or denied membership to the broader university community that privileges those with ICT proficiency. The second gap is that current research in the field of ICT in South Africa is relatively new and its impact on learning still has to be explored.

The first ‘gap’: limited access and proficiency in ICT, is particularly relevant to students from under-resourced schools in rural or township areas in South Africa, despite

recommendations such as ICT access for all teachers and learners in documents such as the *Draft White Paper on e-Education* (2004). Most higher education institutions provide students with access to computer laboratories, however, many institutions do not assume responsibility for students' computer literacy. The students therefore acquire computer literacy skills in an *ad hoc* manner, where they may learn by observing others, by 'trial and error' (Kajee, 2002; 2003), or by attending computer literacy courses at their own expense.

The second gap, relevant to students and teachers, is whether the use of technology in education necessarily equates with learning. Clark (1994) is adamant that it is not the technology, but the pedagogy that impacts on learning. Cummins (2000:538) too is vocal that "There is not a shred of empirical evidence that the massive investment in computer hardware and software has improved achievement levels". His view is that technology has only increased time spent on tasks such as reading, and that the increased time expended, not the technology, has improved achievement. In response to these arguments therefore, Cronje's (1997a) rationale for the infusion of technology into institutions of learning, is based on a two-pronged observation: first, that learners need to be technologically literate, and second, that technology can expedite the learning process.

Against the backdrop of the digital divide in South Africa I explore the use of ICT in the teaching and learning of English. However, the use of ICT is not limited to the English classroom; such a study of online communities of practice would be appropriate for any university course, irrespective of content. My rationale for focusing on English in the

university context is justifiable because first, it is an accredited course of study, and second, the language is dominant in the university environment because it is the medium of instruction and the language in which most of the materials are available. The third reason is that the language is often perceived by non-mother tongue speakers as a route to success in their studies as well as their careers (Kajee, 2000, 2001).

### *1.3.2 The English language and learning debates*

Locating my research in a higher education English course is appropriate because of current debates concerning the language's flexibility and its status as a "world language" (Graddol, 1997:6). Graddol (1997) says further:

English has always been an evolving language and an important driver of change...Some analysts see (the) hybridity and permeability of English as defining features, allowing it to expand quickly into new domains and explaining in part its success as a world language...One of the few certainties associated with the future of the language is that it will continue to evolve, reflecting and constructing the changing role and identities of its speakers (1997:6).

It is not uncommon that English non-mother tongue speakers enter university under-prepared for the academic and linguistic demands and discourses where English is the medium of instruction. Thus, my study examines not just how participants construct their identities in the online medium, but how participants construct their identities through the medium of English.

Historically too, English has played a controversial role in South Africa, and has been central to debates about English usage and hegemony (Lemmer, 1996; Silva, 1997; Chick, 1998; du Pre, 2002; Kajee, 2000, 2001). Key concerns regarding the role played by, and the use of English, particularly in the higher education context, are therefore given attention in this thesis. While it is not the focus of this study to identify or debate

models for the teaching and learning of English, as a basis of my study, I acknowledge that English is the medium of instruction at the institution selected for study, as stipulated in its language policy (*Language Policy of the University of the Witwatersrand*, 2003). My decision to focus on English is also justifiable because it is a subject of choice and current medium of instruction at the majority of higher education institutions in South Africa. My background of over twenty years in the teaching of English, training courses in the use of ICT to teach English<sup>16</sup>, and the changing role played by the language in South Africa's history has motivated me further to explore more fully the teaching and learning of the language in online environments. Although policy documents<sup>17</sup> in South Africa describe the need for technology and resource-based learning, they do not elaborate on the implications for the teaching and learning of English. However, I am of the view that local and international studies<sup>18</sup> on the use of ICT practices in the English classroom open up a world of educational possibilities.

There have been many changes in the political, cultural, and educational spheres in South Africa since the first democratic elections held in 1994. In particular, the issue of increased access to education has become a primary concern (*Higher Education Act*, 1997). With the formation of the National Department of Education, higher education became the responsibility of one Department. The primary task of the Department was to provide access to all South Africans to all institutions of education. Thus access, or what

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<sup>16</sup>For example, the SETI Programme at the University of Ohio (2001), Africa Online through the University of Oregon (2001), *Nicenet* training (Durban Institute of Technology, 2002), *WebCT* training (University of the Witwatersrand, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Refer, for instance, to the *Green Paper on Higher Education* (1996) and the *Higher Education Act* (1997).

<sup>18</sup> These studies are discussed in Chapter 2.

has commonly come to be perceived as “massification”, ensued (*National Plan for Higher Education*, 2001).

The years of disadvantage that characterised the apartheid era (1948 – 1994) were especially apparent in black students’ under-preparedness for higher education, and many of these inequities were attributed directly to language injustices associated with the marginalisation of African languages (du Pre, 2002). For instance, non-mother tongue English speakers were expected to compete with English mother tongue speakers in an English medium of instruction environment. The lack of suitable preparation also emanated from the remnants of the Bantu education system of the apartheid era, in which black schools were deliberately under-resourced and teachers were inadequately trained and prepared for their roles (Hartshorne, 1987). This became apparent when students from such environments entered their first year at higher education institutions (see for example, Hartshorne, 1987; Dreyer, 1995).

In relation to language rights, use, and development, the *Constitution of South Africa* (Act No. 108, 1996) specifies eleven official languages<sup>19</sup>, however, the distribution of speakers of these languages is diverse. Mother tongue speakers of English were reported to number only three and a half million in a population of over forty million people, that is, under nine 9%<sup>20</sup> (Silva, 1997). However, English still assumes a dominant role in education, commerce, science and technology, and as the language of internal and

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<sup>19</sup> IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, English, Afrikaans, SeSotho, Northern Sotho, Setswana, Xitsonga, Siswati, Tshivenda and IsiNdebele, as well as Sign Language as an unofficial twelfth language.

<sup>20</sup> There are obvious difficulties in obtaining accurate statistics with regard to the number of speakers of the language, therefore Silva’s (1997) figures are used here only as a guide.

international communication. Among the reasons provided for its dominance, as alluded to in the previous section, is that English has linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). Following Graddol's (1997) argument that the language is a world language, Bourdieu (1991) says it has symbolic power. That is, it has commercial, cultural, and material value: it ensures career success, opens doors to trade (Lazenby, 1996), and it uplifts the economy (Mesthrie in Chick, 1998). Consequently, mother-tongue education was perceived to play an exclusionary role in apartheid South Africa, and black parents began to see English as a route to upward mobility and empowerment (Setati *et al*, 2002; Kajee, 2000, 2001; Titlestad, 1998; Silva, 1997). The view of parents, learners, and teachers was that English has an almost mystical power: "If you know English well, desired things will follow" (Lemmer, 1996: 84).

English therefore appears to be a pragmatic choice at the level of higher education. However, the arguments do not articulate the need for the use of ICT in the English classroom context. Cummins' comment is apt:

Our task as educators in general, and as language educators in particular, should be to access the potential of IT to improve the human condition. As educators we are committed to drawing out the potential of students we teach; as language educators, we strive to increase students' capacity to use language to fulfil their personal goals and contribute to their societies (2000: 539).

This void prompted me to question how ICT it is being used in the English language classroom. In particular, I am interested in answering questions from a socio-cultural perspective, around the extent to which participants collaborate and negotiate meaning, as well as construct identities and exercise autonomy in online spaces where these exist.

Having presented an overview of the underlying principles for my study, in the section to follow I locate it first, in the broader African context, then within the South African context.

#### **1.4 Contextualising the study**

In contextualising my study, I first examine the use of ICT on the African continent, primarily as a means of social inclusion. I then narrow the field by presenting an overview of the South African context, where I examine key policy documents and initiatives relevant to the use of ICT in schools, industry, and the higher education context.

##### *1.4.1 Describing the African context*

Much of the argument cautioning against the use of ICT in Africa, as explained by Lelliott *et al* (2000), is made around the continent's more pressing concerns: war, famine, poverty, and lack of basic education. Particularly apt are views such as the following:

...how can a woman be interested in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on a hungry stomach with a child crying on her back for food and another she is carrying in her arms dying because of lack of medical care? (Ochieng and Radloff, 1996)<sup>21</sup>.

Although the writers are vocal about such critical issues, which are relevant to any developing nation, they do support the use of ICT in promoting new opportunities for democracy in Africa, such as extending its use to women, providing education to geographically distant areas, and in disseminating health information. The view is supported by Chapman (1996), who feels that society should exploit technology to

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<sup>21</sup> Cited in Lelliott *et al* (2000: 43).

provide education for democratic, socially inclusive, economically advanced communities. Warschauer's (2002a; 2002b; 2003a; 2003b; 2004; 2005, in press) studies in Egypt support this stance, while simultaneously demonstrating the difficulties encountered with bureaucracy in developing countries.

The need for inclusion across the African continent is further articulated by South African President Mbeki, who speaks about the need to improve connectivity among people in Africa. He draws links between connectivity as a strategy for poverty reduction in NEPAD<sup>22</sup> (Chisholm, 2003). Lauglo *et al* support the President's view when they say it "is not *whether* computing skills need to be taught, but *how soon* it will be affordable and practicable to introduce such skills, and in what precise ways ICT can be most helpful in a school setting" (2003: 16 in Chisholm, Dhunpath and Paterson, 2004) (my italics).

In relation to connectivity, issues of infrastructure cannot be ignored. The SADC<sup>23</sup> e-readiness study (SADC, 2000a in Chisholm *et al*, 2004) considers education and curricula that introduce exposure to the use of different technologies in the e-world essential for ICT development. In order to maximize benefits to communities the researchers recommend the following, in no particular order:

- Basic infrastructure
- Electrification
- Education
- Integration of ICT by government
- Increased telegeography
- Growth of teledensity and mobile penetration

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<sup>22</sup> NEPAD – New Partnership for Africa's Development.

<sup>23</sup> SADC – Southern African Development Community.

Increased PC penetration  
Increased Internet population  
Growth of banking infrastructure  
Policy and regulation: liberalisation of communications infrastructure  
Affordability  
Multipurpose community centres (SADC 2000a: 43-45 in Chisholm *et al*, 2004).

Such recommendations are applicable across the African continent, including in South Africa, as was reiterated by South African Minister of Telecommunications, Dr Matsepe-Casaburri, when she urged that the infrastructure for the introduction of technology be established in rural South Africa (*Morning Live, SABC 2*, 17 May 2005).

In relation to practice, initiatives such as SchoolNet Africa are underway, connecting schools across Africa. The aim of the initiative is to provide improved education access, quality and efficiency through the use of ICT in African schools<sup>24</sup>. The organisation supports the right of all African youth to education and lifelong learning, by providing affordable and sustainable access to information, African education content on the Net, and online content in local languages. Currently, thirty-one African countries form part of the SchoolNet network, including South Africa<sup>25</sup>.

#### *1.4.2 Describing the South African context*

In locating my study in the South African context, I examine government's call for ICT-based initiatives in the country, ICT initiatives introduced at the level of school and

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<sup>24</sup> [www.schoolnetfrica.net](http://www.schoolnetfrica.net) Accessed 5 October 2005.

<sup>25</sup> The countries are: Angola, Benin, Botswana, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Cote D'Ivoire, Egypt, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

industry, and then examine policy issues that underpin learning principles and the use of ICT.

Over the past four years South African President Mbeki has reminded South Africans (in his State of the Nation Addresses) of the vital role played by ICT in creating global economic networks for South Africa. For example, in his Address in 2002, he said “a critical and pervasive element in economic development in the current age is the optimum utilisation of information and communication technology” (Mbeki, 2002, online). In 2003 he promised that greater attention would be paid to the development of ICT capabilities among the youth (Mbeki, 2003, online). In 2004 he urged South Africans to ensure that the country and people are properly positioned within the global community of nations, fully understanding and responding to the diverse political, economic, social and technological challenges of the process of globalisation (Mbeki, 2004, online). And in 2005 he said that government would focus more on ICT and telecommunications systems<sup>26</sup>.

Bearing in mind the words of the President, South Africa is still considered the most technologically advanced country in Africa, with one million of the two million reported Internet users in Africa, residing in the country (Lelliott *et al*, 2000). South Africa is also rated as having the highest number of domains and websites of the SADC countries: 187 649 domains and 3002 websites, compared with Angola, for instance, with 8 domains and 136 websites (in Chisholm *et al*, 2004).

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<sup>26</sup> President Mbeki’s State of the Nation Addresses (2002, 2003, 2004, 2005) accessed [www.info.gov.za/speeches/](http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/) on 5 October 2005.

The country has also made several initiatives into the field of ICT at school level, largely as a result of documents such as the *Draft White Paper on e-Education* (2004), which is aimed at promoting the use of ICT in schools. The document, steered by the Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, calls for all teachers and learners to have access to ICT in order to promote socio-economic growth in the country, and to narrow the digital divide by 2013. Discussion around the document led to initiatives such as the Thutong Project<sup>27</sup>, which is the Department of Education's Web portal designed to support teaching and learning in South Africa. The portal aims to help teachers technologically by providing high quality materials, and enabling them to communicate and work together. However, the project is still in its introductory phase.

Another initiative, located in the Gauteng region to promote ICT access and use among the youth is the GautengOnline Project<sup>28</sup>. The Project hopes to bridge the digital divide in Gauteng by positioning the province at the centre of technological change and innovation. The Project was launched with the South African information technology (IT) industry designing IT solutions for Gauteng schools, and computers were introduced to selected classrooms for the pilot project. The Project is still in its pilot phase.

Other technological initiatives are being made in industry with the newly drafted ICT Empowerment Charter (2005)<sup>29</sup>. The Charter arose as a result of apartheid policies that denied black people and women access to economic resources in South Africa on the

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<sup>27</sup> Please refer to [www.thutong.org.za](http://www.thutong.org.za) for more detail. Accessed 20 August 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Please refer to [www.gautengonline.com](http://www.gautengonline.com) Accessed 5 October 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Please refer to [www.ictcharter.org.za/](http://www.ictcharter.org.za/) Accessed 29 August 2005.

basis of race and gender. The document aims to bridge the digital divide by promoting access to ICT, in particular to black South Africans and women, as an equity initiative. It is viewed as a route to reducing unemployment and poverty in the country. Further initiatives in commerce and industry include the development of organisations such as the Meraka Institute<sup>30</sup>, which is designed to facilitate socio-economic development through technology, once again, in an attempt to narrow the digital divide.

Thus, South Africa is making inroads into technological redress at the levels of policy, school, and industry. At the level of policy, key recommendations are being made in relation to ICT and a resource-based approach. While endeavours such as the *Draft White Paper on e-Education* (2004) are currently not emulated in higher education, policies such as the the *Higher Education National Plan* and the *Green Paper on Higher Education*, highlight the need for an ICT approach:

Knowledge, information and culture increasingly inhabit a borderless world with new communication technologies transforming the way people work, produce and consume. *As South Africa locates itself in this network of global exchanges and interactions, higher education will have to produce the skills and technological innovations necessary for successful economic participation in the global market. It must also socialize a new generation with the requisite cultural values and communication competencies to become citizens of an international global community* (Section 3.1, Chapter 2, *Green Paper on Higher Education*, 1996) (my italics).

Like at school and industry level, the overarching recommendation for the use of ICT is joining the competitive global economic market, and the borderless world of ICT is proposed as a route to global participation. Thus higher education is seen as playing a pivotal role in preparing the youth for the knowledge and information society. The *Green Paper* suggests further that one of the measures that can be introduced to improve the efficiency of the higher education system, reduce unit costs and increase productivity, is

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<sup>30</sup> Please refer to [www.meraka.org.za](http://www.meraka.org.za) for further details. Accessed 29 August 2005.

by introducing new teaching and learning strategies such as open and resource-based learning which are less labour-intensive. The document proposes that that this would lead to significant changes in traditional modes of programme delivery and staff-student ratios<sup>31</sup>.

Despite the call for an ICT-based approach to global participation, the role played by ICT in higher education teaching and learning spheres is fairly uncharted territory in South Africa. Recommendations made in discussion documents such as the *Green Paper* have yet to filter extensively into teaching-learning paradigms. However, studies such as those conducted by van der Merwe (2004); SAIDE<sup>32</sup> (2000, 2003); Czerniewicz (2004), Czerniewicz and Brown (2005); Czerniewicz and Carr (2005); Spurrett (2005); Hodgkinson-Williams and Mostert (2005); Turkington and Frank (2005); Carr, Cox, Eden and Hanslo (2004); and Lundall and Howell (2000), indicate a growing awareness of the value of the use of ICT. Although the studies focus on the higher education and school sectors, I have included them because they demonstrate similar concerns.

Van der Merwe (2004) evaluates the use of *WebCT* at the university of Stellenbosch, and the SAIDE (2000a; 2000b; 2003) projects examine ICT-use in schools and higher education. Czerniewicz (2004) frames a discussion of the articulation of computers in teaching and learning in higher education, with a focus on the University of Cape Town, while Czerniewicz and Carr (2005) call for a community of practice of researchers in the field of ICT. Spurrett (2005) conducts research into an online critical thinking component of a Philosophy course at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and Hodgkinson-Williams

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<sup>31</sup> Section 5.3, Chapter 2, *Green Paper on Higher Education* (1996).

<sup>32</sup> SAIDE – South African Institute of Distance Education.

and Mostert (2005) examine staff and student perceptions of the use online debate in encouraging online learning communities among B.Ed students. Turkington and Frank (2005) narrate their Journalism students' experiences with the creation of an online newspaper, while Carr *et al* (2004) examine online student participation from a community of practice perspective in an Economics course at the University of Cape Town. Finally, Lundall and Howell (2000) survey the use of computers in schools. The studies cumulatively indicate that ICT is a growing area of research in South Africa though many of the studies also demonstrate that teachers and learners are not yet sufficiently prepared for, or trained in its use. Although studies are being undertaken in the field of ICT within an educational context, applied research into ICT teaching-learning paradigms and pedagogies, particularly in higher education, is still in need of further consolidation.

Higher education institutions are currently in a phase of transition and transformation, and face challenges such as open learning, lifelong learning, commercialisation and quality requirements (*White Paper on Education and Training*, 1994; *Green Paper on Higher Education*, 1996). Such challenges could be answered by an ICT-based approach. For instance, the concept 'open learning' encapsulates many of the features of learning in higher education, and may be defined as:

a flexible, learner-centred approach to education, seeking to increase access to educational opportunities by removing all unnecessary barriers to learning. This involves using the full spectrum of available resources to ensure quality and cost-effectiveness in meeting diverse educational needs, including preparation of the widest possible range of learners for the process of lifelong learning (in SAIDE, 1997: 4).

The key features of open learning are relevant to my study on the use of ICT and online practices because they concur with the theoretical concepts underpinning autonomy,

which is an integral characteristic of communities of practice. The features of open learning may be summarised thus (in SAIDE, 1997):

- *Learner-centeredness*: Key to learner-centeredness is that the learner should be the focus of the educational process and an active decision-maker. Education should build on learners' experiences and encourage independent and critical thinking.
- *Lifelong learning*: The concept entails that learners should continue their learning throughout their lives, and that learning should be relevant to learners' needs and life experiences.
- *Flexibility*: Learning should be flexible in order to cater for learners' needs regarding what they want to learn, how they want to learn, when they want to learn, and the pace they want to learn at.
- *Removal of access barriers*: Open learning allows for the removal of barriers such as geographical constraints, race, gender, age and physical disability.
- *Recognition of prior learning*: Learners should be able to accumulate credits for other learning experiences and contexts.
- *Learner support*: Learners should receive adequate support within the learning environment, such as counselling, tutoring, interaction and access to facilities and resources.
- *Expectations of success*: Learners should be afforded opportunities to complete learning programmes, and the qualifications they receive are marketable.
- *Quality learning*: Learning should be of the highest quality and should be evaluated and adapted regularly.
- *Cost-effectiveness*: Learning opportunities should be cost-effective, which does not mean cheap, rather, quality learning which utilises a range of resources for its success.

Thus in this thesis I suggest that it is precisely the basic tenets of documents such as the *Green* and *White Papers on Higher Education*, as shown above, that need to be implemented, or else they remain confined to policy.

However, my position is also that some caution in relation to the use of ICT is necessary. As is spelt out in the documents, additional budgetary outlays are required in the form of investment in hardware, software, and the development of online materials. Further concerns are expressed about ICT utilization and its sustainability. Also, if such an approach were to be adopted extensively in South Africa and elsewhere, it would have serious implications for teacher-training and professional development, as improvement in the quality of teaching-learning pedagogies involving the use of ICT is essential.

Therefore, although South Africa is considered a prominent player in the field of ICT in the SADC region, the country is a relatively minor player globally, and research in the field of ICT at macro- and micro-levels in the country is valuable within its context as a developing country. As was stated earlier, in the higher education context, researchers have begun to examine ICT-based issues. However, there is a dearth of such studies, particularly in the area of English language education, and research such as my study can help provide insight into ICT-implementation at the level of classroom pedagogy, as well as into learners and how they construct and position themselves in relation to its use.

Bearing in mind the challenges surrounding the implementation of ICT-based teaching and learning practices, the issue of ICT use is not restricted to issues of policy, access, training and budget. The use of ICT also impinges on power struggles created by inconsistent access to technology, for its potential users. Broadly, my thesis will make a contribution to the following ten key issues, and these in turn provide the scope and focus in my project.

#### *1.4.3 The scope and contribution of the study*

First, educational reform, equity and empowerment: the South African government has set out to build a solid foundation for the development of its people after the first democratic elections that were held in 1994. Reforms such as those in the educational system have improved the lives of millions of South Africans by making learning more accessible through the implementation of the *National Qualifications Framework* (NQF) and the *Higher Education Act* of 1997 (van Buren-Schele and Odendaal, 2001).

Conversely, it is evident that higher education systems in many other sub-Saharan African countries have deteriorated. According to the African Virtual University<sup>33</sup> statistics in 2003, for instance, higher education is provided to only 3.5% of the population, compared to 60% in industrialised countries. The Net has great potential implications for the education sector. Theoretically, Net technology has the capacity to make higher education more accessible, by delivering materials to remote areas and by providing multiple access routes. This has implications for issues of equity and empowerment by providing education to those who have not had equitable access in the past. The *Green Paper on Higher Education* (South Africa, 1996) and the subsequent *Higher Education Act* (South Africa, 1997) endorse this development.

Second, the development of ICT as an innovative teaching tool: although the Net has been referred to as an innovative teaching tool that enhances learning (Gordin, Gomez, Pea and Fishman, 1996; Johnson and Huff, 2000), contrasting views that it may contribute to the marginalisation of those who cannot afford technology or access to it, exist (Asmal, 2000; Lelliott *et al*, 2000). Although initially, much of the growth of ICT-use was attributed to technologists and researchers, it was when educators and learners were introduced to e-mail, newsgroups and listservs that utilisation grew (*Wall Street Journal*, 4.2.2002). The use of the Net in the educational context has therefore grown tremendously. However, there are conflicting views regarding its value. This thesis explores the use of different ICT applications as pedagogical tools.

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<sup>33</sup> African Virtual University (AVU) is a World Bank initiative established to provide quality education to African countries utilising telecommunications. AVU is based in Nairobi, Kenya, and has over 57 Learning Centers in 27 African countries. Please refer to <http://www.avu.org>.

Third, building diversity awareness and providing opportunities for growth: on one hand, the Net may be seen as a medium for providing lessons to vast numbers of people from diverse cultural and geographic backgrounds, bringing people closer and facilitating communication (Moote, 2002). On the other hand, it may be considered a lucrative business opportunity. Moote (2002) points out that global expenditure on education was estimated at between \$US 1 trillion and \$US 2.1 trillion, making one consider the potential of courses targeted at a market that has access to telecommunications systems. My thesis examines how a web course impacts on learners in relation to creating local and global opportunities for communication. Although such courses have implications for income-generation in the educational sphere, I do not explore this.

Fourth, the development of new, more integrative strategies for teaching and learning: as provided in the research context of this chapter, in South Africa, the use of computers in education and online learning is a relatively new phenomenon. The lack of electronic and digital resources is not relieved in any way by the fact that many schools, especially those in under-resourced rural areas, do not even have electricity, let alone computers. However, there are initiatives in place that are starting to introduce computers to schools more concerted, the GautengOnline Project being one of them. The project aims to introduce computers to schools in a more structured manner, as well as to train teachers in the use of computer strategies in their teaching (*The Star*, 10 September 2003; Padayachee, 2002). The Thutong Portal, as discussed earlier in this chapter, is another initiative. The SchoolNet Project is a further initiative that aims to open doors to communication among teachers across Africa.

While technological approaches to teaching and learning were initially limited to behaviourist-like approaches, there is a shift to more integrative, participative approaches which include multimedia in the form of visual and audio texts. My thesis explores the introduction of a web course that runs parallel to a face-to-face English course, as a teaching intervention to promote interaction and participation among all participants.

Fifth, mobilisation of higher education and industry to meet the needs of the country: there are increasing demands from industry that traditional education provided by higher education institutions are falling short of the needs of industry (Zafeiriou, Nunes and Ford, 2001). Because of changing circumstances, higher education institutions, in particular, are being encouraged to develop web-based curricula in order to meet these needs. Therefore the benefits of the use of technology in educational environments need to be considered carefully within learning environments in higher education, where my project is located.

Sixth, potential as a learning resource: the WWW has great potential as a learning resource, by providing teachers and learners with unlimited access to information, previously only available in libraries. The learning opportunities should therefore be more profound, with access being available in the classroom and at home, at any time. The implications for the teaching and learning of English and English second language in particular, are important. The Net has the ability to expose students of English to other

English speakers worldwide at the ‘click of a mouse’. Authentic learning experiences, a requirement for optimal learning, as spelt out by many researchers and theorists ( for instance, Vygotsky, 1978; Krashen, 1981; Lave and Wenger, 1991) are therefore enabled.

Seventh, possible links between ICT, learning and cognition: one of the key issues surrounding the use of the Net in education concerns its contribution to learning. Does the use of the Net equate neatly with learning and cognition, and if so, how? On an affective level it may be motivating for students to use new technology, but until it can be established whether learning occurs, the use of ICT will remain a novelty. Obstacles, as listed by van Buren-Schele and Odendaal (2001) and Lelliott *et al* (2000) earlier in this chapter, include the lack of a communication infrastructure for online teaching and learning, the high costs of telecommunications in South Africa compared to other developed countries, illiteracy and lack of computer skills, limitations on the availability of bandwidth which influences the speed of data processing, and access to basic computers. Obstacles notwithstanding, the implications for learning and cognition need to be considered, because higher education institutions are being encouraged to take on the challenge by introducing the utilisation of information and communication technology in the curriculum. A more extensive examination of learning models will be provided in Chapter 3.

Eighth, reaching large numbers of students: web-based distance and flexible learning environments enable higher education institutions, in particular, to reach an increasing number of students. Zafeiriou *et al* (2001) refer to online environments and the use of the

WWW as an educational panacea, which provides students with skills such as online communication, discussion, problem analysis, problem solving, critical thinking, and negotiation of meaning. This issue may be debated as online learning becomes more fully integrated in educational institutions and its impact on learning is established. Although online learning was initially used to supplement classroom instruction, online classes are increasingly providing a popular form of interaction for participants. Online learning has also changed the social dynamics of education by placing learners and educators on equal footing – a move away from the traditional dominant role of the educator. In the project described in my thesis I examine the role of the participants (learners and facilitator) in the online environment.

Ninth, preparation for e-learning: online strategies and courses provide students with a powerful medium for peer learning and prepares them for e-learning<sup>34</sup>. With regard to the learning environment, for instance, English might be taught face-to-face or online, or using a blend of both methods. In the latter case, students might be able to apply what they have learnt in face-to-face classrooms to the online context and vice versa (Kannan and MackNish, 2000). Online courses and course components therefore contribute to an additional learning environment. According to Kannan and MackNish's (2000) experience, online course components influence learner motivation and self-directed learning, which I explore in some depth in my study.

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<sup>34</sup> e-learning comprises a variety of multimedia modes, including the Net, while online learning utilises the Net. The concept is discussed in more detail in the section where I define online learning.

Tenth, learners as global players: South African higher education institutions are in a period of transition and transformation. To ensure a more democratic teaching-learning environment that is underpinned by equity and empowerment, as encapsulated in the *Higher Education Act* (1997), one way forward is the introduction of technology into higher education curricula, ensuring that South Africa becomes a more global player in the field, a point also expressed by Asmal (2000), former Minister of Education<sup>35</sup>.

Having presented the key aim and research questions framing my study, as well as the rationale and context, I now provide an overview of the structure of the thesis.

### **1.5 An outline of chapters**

In order to answer my main research question “To what extent do English non-mother tongue speakers in a university English classroom engage in communities of practice in online spaces?” I have organised the thesis into four parts, which consist of eight chapters:

Part I: Beyond the digital divide: context, theory, access comprises Chapters 1, 2, and 3.

In Chapter 1, I introduce the aim, research questions, rationale, and context of the study and the impetus for my work, by locating ICT and the digital era in the African and South African contexts. This chapter also provides an introduction to my research project by describing the context of higher education and recognising the role played by English at the university.

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<sup>35</sup> Professor Asmal held office as Minister of Education in South Africa from 1999-2004.

Chapter 2 reviews literature in the field of online learning. I examine international and local studies in the field, then examine the following key issues: the concept of online learning; the paradigm shift from face-to-face classrooms to virtual classrooms; computer-mediated communication and the emergence of computer-assisted language learning in the English classroom; the use of specific Internet-based strategies that are appropriate for the teaching and learning of English; and the changing role of the teacher as a result of the introduction of technology in the classroom.

Chapter 3 provides a theoretical framework for my study by theorising the following broad concepts: online learning, communities of practice, literacy as a social practice, New Literacy Studies, identity and autonomy. I explore literature related to learning theories that are based on the assertion that learning is an active, learner-centred process. These assertions are discussed within the framework of Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory of Learning, and Rogoff's (2003) and Lave and Wenger's (1991, 1996, 2002) Situated Learning Theory and communities of practice theories. The concepts of literacy as a social practice and New Literacy Studies is theorised around the work of Gee (1996, 1997, 2000), Street (1984, 1993, 1998, 2003), Barton *et al* (2000), Lankshear and Knobel (1997, 2004), and Knobel and Lankshear (2002). The construction of participant identities is examined in relation to the work of Hall (1992) and Norton (Pierce) (1995, 1997, 2000). The final concept, learner autonomy, is explored using the work of Knowles (1975) and Guglielmino (1977, 1997).

In Part II, I present Chapter 4, the design, methodology and implications of my study. The case study as an approach to research is presented, together with a problematisation of its strengths and weaknesses. First, the pilot project and design is introduced, then the final project is described in terms of planning, time frames, implementation and review. The participant sample and research methodology is presented. The research methodology includes survey questionnaires to establish participants' access to, and proficiency in ICT, participants' electronic literacy histories<sup>36</sup>, observations of participants, questionnaires issued to school managers, semi-structured interviews with students, linguistic analyses of messages posted to discussion threads, and facilitator diaries and journalistic notes. All the data collection methods are discussed and the strengths and limitations of each are explored. Efforts to ensure reliability and validity of data and instruments in the project are also presented.

The data emanating from the project are presented in three chapters: Chapters 5, 6, and 7, which forms Part III of the thesis: Electronic literacy, identity, and autonomy. In the first of these, Chapter 5, I present and analyse data relating to participants' electronic and digital literacy practices within and outside of the university community. I explore issues of ICT access, proficiency, and use, both of the Net, and the *Nicenet* online course. The broad context is also described in terms of the university where the study is based, lecturer use of ICT, and the English courses selected for this study.

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<sup>36</sup> I had to create the method 'electronic literacy history' in order to establish participants' electronic literacy background and practice. As I explain further in Chapter 4, it is based loosely on 'life history' accounts as a structured form of data, and is an autobiographical account of how participants began their encounters with ICT.

In Chapter 6, I present data from observations, participants' electronic literacy histories, interviews and data elicited from discussion threads to illustrate how participants make meaning through participation, the relationships they establish, how their identities are constructed in online communities of practice, and how they position themselves in relation to an ICT-mode of delivery, and social issues in key course readings.

In Chapter 7, issues of autonomy are explored in relation to data elicited from observations and interviews. In this chapter the data is described and analysed using Guglielmino's (1977, 1997) and Knowles' (1975) frameworks for autonomy. In essence, the frameworks examine how the participants perceive the online space helps them formulate learning goals, identify learning resources, choose and implement learning strategies, evaluate learning outcomes and manage their time.

Finally, in Part IV: Conclusions, and implications for teaching and further research, I present Chapter 8 which is a summary of the findings of my project on online communities of practice. The implications of my research, as based on findings from survey questionnaires, personal observations, student electronic literacy histories, interviews with students, facilitator journals and the analyses of discussion thread postings, are presented. I contend that online communities of practice are facilitated by instructors among students who have not had extensive previous exposure to the use of ICT. This is achieved by enabling participants to develop and sustain relationships locally and globally, as well as by facilitating their construction of identity, and by enabling autonomous learning. I suggest that the roles played by facilitators and learners are

changing with the introduction of ICT in the teaching-learning environment, and recommend changes in policy, practice, curriculum design, and in the role of teachers and learners. Limitations of my research, as well as suggestions for further research are also offered.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has overviewed the aims, rationale, key research questions and the context of my study on online communities of practice in South Africa. The motivation for this study is that the introduction of ICT to curricula ensures a more democratic teaching-learning environment that is underscored by equity, empowerment, and social inclusion. Issues within the African and South African context, presented from the perspective of ICT-use in developing countries, illustrate the need for this assumption to become the lived experience of learners if they are to succeed as autonomous, lifelong learners who are able to participate and interact successfully, not just within the university environment, but in a globally competitive world. In Chapter 2, I explore the terrain of online learning, where the concept of ‘online learning’ is defined and the notion ‘computer-mediated communication’ is deconstructed.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **The terrain of online learning: A local and global perspective**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The use of ICT in South Africa is worth consideration, given the context of development, and because issues of power arise concerning access to, and the use of, ICT. Chapter 2 provides international and local research findings in the field of online learning, and explores the terrain of online learning in greater detail, by problematising six specific areas which I consider central to the thesis. I define online learning and discuss the paradigm shift from face-to-face teaching and learning to teaching and learning in a virtual environment. The notion ‘computer-mediated communication’ and its role in the teaching and learning of English are discussed. The concept ‘computer-assisted language learning’ is presented within a framework that describes the transition from behaviourist, to communicative, and integrative approaches, as well as network-based language teaching. Specific online practices such as e-mail, e-journals and weblogs, the WWW, audio and video streaming, and web course managers that are appropriate for the teaching and learning of English are presented and discussed. Finally, I consider the changing role of the teacher in an online environment. I demonstrate in this chapter that the use of ICT in online teaching and learning of English mirrors the historical shifts in face-to-face approaches to teaching the language.

#### **2.2 The debates concerning ICT in teaching and learning**

The use of ICT in teaching and learning is not a new phenomenon as teachers and learners find themselves more involved in, or influenced by, the digital era. There is,

however, some debate regarding whether the use of ICT has the potential to transform the teaching-learning process by influencing student achievement, or whether it is a tool in the process of learning. On one hand, for Greyling and Pete (2001), there is recognition that ICT has the potential to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. On the other hand, Clark (1983, 1994, 2001) argues that ICT is the vehicle to deliver instruction, and that it does not influence student achievement. Clark explains that students benefit when learning from the use of multimedia, but that the benefits derive, not from the media *per se*, but from the learning strategies that are incorporated with the media.

In a more recent study conducted by Fuchs and Woessmann (in Harris, *The Star*, 23 March 2005), the computer-use of approximately 100 000 fifteen-year olds in thirty-one developed and developing countries was surveyed in order to establish their computer practices and the influence this has on the subjects studied at school. The results show that the children's learning was hindered rather than helped by computers. If students had computers at home, the study found it was family affluence and a better educational background that influenced their achievement, not necessarily their access to computers, which reportedly diminished students' performance in Literacy, Science, and Mathematics. The researchers speculate that reasons for their findings could be that learning with computers might not be the most efficient way of learning.

Studies of the influence of ICT are not limited to its impact on achievement. Other key areas in which the possible influence of ICT in the English classroom have been studied, include international and local studies on its influence on teaching and learning, the

teaching-learning context, teacher and learner perceptions of ICT-use, online collaboration and participation, and finally the impact of ICT in educational contexts. In sections to follow, I present the results of studies in these key areas, both internationally and locally, which are relevant to my study. The international studies focus on issues from the context of developing countries, while the local studies focus on the developing country context.

### *2.2.1 International studies in ICT-use*

#### *2.2.1.1 ICT-use, influence on teaching and learning, and the teaching-learning context*

Internationally, the use of ICT has been found to influence English language teaching and learning significantly. For example, in his study of thirty-eight higher education institutions offering English foreign language courses, Jarvis (2003, 2004) describes the types of courses delivered at higher education institutions in the United Kingdom, the ways in which ICT is used, and the attitudes of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) providers. He finds that computers are a significant feature in courses and that key types of programmes include the use of web-based materials, word processors, Power Point, e-mail writing tasks, CD-Roms, Web-site creation, chat room communication and teacher-produced multi-media software. He therefore recommends that teachers and learners have to be trained to use ICT effectively.

Further evidence in relation to the influence of the Net on teaching and learning, was found by Shaw and Polovina (1999). In their examination of how the Net is affecting

teaching and learning in higher education institutions<sup>37</sup>, they found that the construction of courses placed heavy demands on tutors' time, and that tutors and teachers had to be prepared professionally for computer and Net literacy in the classroom before they could be involved with students. Shaw and Polovina (1999) reveal that students who were working completely online communicated more extensively *via* e-mail than they would have done face-to-face or by telephone, but also felt isolated.

In relation to the teaching-learning context, proponents of online learning claim that it can transform education by promoting student-centered communication, collaboration and inquiry<sup>38</sup>. However, Warschauer's (1996a) study of ICT-based writing at Miller College (Hawaii) demonstrates that while this might be so, socio-cultural factors also shape online courses. He finds that discipline and order prevailed in the English class studied, as was consistent with the ethos of the Christian nature of the College, as well as the teacher's teaching philosophy.

#### *2.2.1.2 Teacher and learner perceptions*

Extensive international studies, such as those by Cunningham (2000), Karyan and Crowe (1997), Koszalka (2001), Zafeiriou, Nunes and Ford (2001), and Hara and Kling (1999), have been conducted to establish teacher and learner-perceptions of the use of ICT.

The studies collectively demonstrate that students perceive ICT to have both positive and negative influences on the teaching and learning of English: on one hand, Cunningham

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<sup>37</sup> Shaw and Polovina's (1999) study was conducted at London's South Bank University.

<sup>38</sup> Such as Shaw and Polovina (1999).

(2000), for example, finds that students felt the use of ICT was non-threatening and challenging, that it benefited their writing, and that their grades had improved as a result of its use. On the other hand, Karyan and Crowe (1997), in their study of eight professors and ninety-six students at California Lutheran University, found that students were equally divided between those who felt there was a change in their behaviour and those who felt there was not, as a result of online interventions. Some of the students objected to being forced to participate in discussion groups, while others felt that they did not have sufficient access to technology and that they did not enjoy participating in online group discussions.

In their study of student perceptions of conditions affecting participation in online group work, Zafeiriou *et al* (2001) studied the perceptions of about fifty students at the University of Sheffield. Six intervening factors were found to facilitate or constrain online group participation: familiarity with computers (students who were more familiar with computers participated more comfortably and confidently); familiarity with the subject (participants reported that prior knowledge of the subject influenced participation positively); typing skills (this was found to be important especially in synchronous communication, as students who could participate successfully synchronously and in several discussion threads could type relatively well); group size and attendance (students preferred smaller groups and students who did not attend regularly were frowned upon); level of interest; and technical problems (students felt they lost time and were frustrated by technical problems).

Hara and Kling (1999) highlight some of the student frustrations in their case study of a Web-based distance education course at a United States university. They determined that students felt frustrated at having to e-mail their responses, even if it was only to respond “I agree”, whereas in a face-to-face class they would simply nod. Some of them also experienced difficulty that they did not get immediate feedback from the instructor. They also experienced difficulty in accessing information from the Net. A further frustration was technological problems and the absence of technical support personnel. The instructor also felt frustrated at times that she could not help students with technical problems. Students also felt frustrated that the instructor’s instructions were ambiguous or vague, leaving them uncertain of what to do, while the instructor felt she was giving them options. Hara and Kling (1999) therefore conclude that instructors must develop new pedagogies as well as different approaches to managing online courses.

In relation to teacher perceptions, teachers who use ICT are said to have a more positive attitude towards its use in the classroom. In her study of forty K-12<sup>39</sup> teachers across six states in the United States, Koszalka (2001) confirmed her hypothesis that teachers who communicated *via* listservs about the use of Web-based resources in the classroom have a more positive attitude towards them. They also had stronger beliefs and feelings towards the use of other WWW resources. She therefore feels that knowledge about an innovation and a positive attitude is a prerequisite to using it. In their study of teacher-perceptions, Karyan and Crowe (1997) also found that teachers were positive about the use of discussion boards for various reasons, including: it facilitates discussion outside class,

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<sup>39</sup> Kindergarten to Grade 12.

encourages group interaction, facilitates after-hours student interaction, and encourages ESL students to become more fluent in English.

### *2.2.1.3 Participation, collaboration, and social presence*

The computer-mediated communication environment is said to promote participation, and encourage social presence. Warschauer (1996a), for example, examines whether second language students participate more equally in face-to-face or electronic discussions. In his study students were given two questions to discuss, the first face-to-face, and the second, electronically. He found that electronic exchanges were longer, and that there was more equal participation in the electronic discussion than the face-to-face discussion. However, collaboration is not always positive in online environments, as found by Davey (2001), whose students experienced difficulty collaborating on Web page projects.

In relation to social presence, Abdullah's (2001b) study of twelve students (from Japan, Turkey, Sweden and parts of the United States, who were studying *via* an online course), demonstrated that the medium stimulated the use of social presence cues. Most social presence cues used included interactional prompts (invitations to respond, requests for support, addressing others by name, greetings), self-disclosure cues (reflections on personal perspectives, emotions), demonstrating courtesy (capitalising names, discussing interests), and tonal indicators (playful remarks and asides).

Although some studies indicate feelings of isolation in online environments (for example, Shaw and Polovina, 1999), the use of computer-mediated communication is also said to

have a positive impact on feelings of isolation. Johnson and Huff (2000) found that the use of a class listserv, which was used to post lecture outlines and questions, helped students feel connected to their classmates and overcome isolation.

#### *2.2.1.4 The impact of ICT on schools*

To summarise, ICT is said to have a positive impact on teaching and learning in schools<sup>40</sup>. According to Reeves (1998):

There is considerable evidence that learners develop critical thinking skills as authors, designers and constructors of multimedia or as active participants in constructivist learning environments. Further research on whether media and technology are as effective as teachers and other methods is no longer needed (Reeves, 1998: online, 38 of 48).

Reeves (1998) celebrates the positive impact of ICT in schools. The findings of his survey of the impact of the use of media and technology in schools in Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, and the United States, may be summarised as follows: first, computers as tutors have positive effects on learning as measured by standardised assessment tests, and are more motivating to students. Second, computers are accepted more readily by teachers than other technologies, and are supported more by administrators, parents, teachers, politicians and the public. Third, students are able to complete a given set of educational objectives in less time with computer-based instruction than in the time needed in traditional approaches.

In essence, international studies demonstrate that ICT influences teaching and learning significantly. In particular the studies point out that students communicate and collaborate more extensively in an online environment, and that the online environment

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<sup>40</sup> Although this study does not focus on the school context, I draw on pertinent studies conducted in the school context in cases where the issues studied are similar my study in the higher education context.

also appears to encourage learner autonomy. Internationally, teachers and learners have positive attitudes towards towards online learning, although technological problems have been noted to cause frustration. Having provided a cross-section of international studies in some of the key areas of focus in my study, studies located in South Africa follow.

### *2.2.2 Studies on ICT-use in South Africa*

Studies located in South Africa on the use of ICT in English language education are scarce. Thus I make general reference to a variety of South African studies in which ICT, rather than English, is the focus in order to show some of the current areas of interest in the country: the possibilities and limitations of online learning environments (Cronje, 1997a), learning, motivation and student preferences (Sanders and Ayayee, 1997), lecturer preferences (Cronje and Murdoch, 2001), distance learning (van Buren Schele and Odendaal, 2001), and the use of the Net as an outreach tool (Keats, Collins, Peterson, 2001). Further studies conducted by the Multimedia Education Group at the Technology Unit at the University of Cape Town are also mentioned. Although some of the studies are school-based, rather than focused on the higher education context, I believe that the issues examined are equally relevant to the higher education context, given the scarcity of studies in the latter instance.

#### *2.2.2.1 Possibilities and limitations of ICT and online learning*

First, in order to work successfully in an online environment, students must be familiar with the basics of technology (Cronje, 1997a). In his study Cronje (1997a) determined that co-operative learning works well in online environments, as does online discussion.

In relation to student achievement and learning, it was found by Clarke and Cronje (1998) that the medium of ICT does not overly influence learning when student results in online and face-to-face classes were compared. However, the online medium can influence students affectively, in relation to interest and motivation.

Students were also generally positive about using computers in South Africa, although in relation to student preferences and individual differences, Sanders and Ayayee (1997) found that race and gender demographics influence computer use. Female students, they argue, are more cautious about using ICT, and black South African students feel less capable than white students, having little prior experience with computers. Given that their study is nine years old, the situation of access remains one that is evident along racial divides. The under-resourced schools tend to be located in black rural and township areas, while the better-equipped schools are located in urban areas, and although the latter are currently attended by students from all race groups, they are more strongly populated by white students. Therefore, it is quite possible that black students from under-resourced backgrounds feel less capable with computers. I explore the issue further when I examine access and proficiency among the students selected for my study.

Lecturer preferences also indicate that lecturers who are positive about using ICT tend to use it in their teaching, according to Cronje and Murdoch (2001), who examined the use of *WebCT* at Rand Afrikaans University<sup>41</sup>. Lecturers indicated that ICT also offered benefits such as increasing the opportunity for interaction, developing students' computer

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<sup>41</sup> Rand Afrikaans University is now known as the University of Johannesburg since its merger with Technikon Witwatersrand in 2005.

skills, and decreasing the administrative burden. Problems identified included that it took up too much time, it provided little academic interaction with students, it is not considered for promotion, there is not enough support available, technology is intimidating, and that there is too little knowledge about *WebCT* to utilise it optimally.

South Africa also experiences specific problems in its context as a developing country. Van Buren-Schele and Odendaal (2001) examine some of the problems of introducing online courses at Technikon South Africa, a distance education institution<sup>42</sup>. The obstacles they identify include the lack of communication infrastructure for online teaching and learning, high costs of telecommunications, lack of coverage in rural areas, illiteracy and lack of computer skills, limitations on the availability of bandwidth (which affects the speed of data processing) and limited access to computers.

Odendaal's (2001) case study examines the use of technology in the design, development and delivery of a distance education online course at Technikon South Africa. One of the objectives of her study was to examine responses of participants to determine the effect of interactive online learning on learners, the changing role of learners, participation pattern of learners, and problems experienced by learners. She found that learners experienced communication anxiety, particularly about communicating online, which was a new experience for most of them. The role of the instructor changed from lecturer to facilitator and from provider to participator, and needed training to adapt to the new role. Odendaal (2001) found, however, that learner participation was not spread out

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<sup>42</sup> Although my study does not focus on the distance education context, I refer to Van Buren-Schele and Odendaal's (2001) study, as well as Odendaal's (2001) study because of the similar challenges experienced.

equitably through the year. There was more participation around assignment due dates and exams. Peer interaction was low, with the facilitator using most of the online time. With regard to problems experienced, learners indicated that access to and knowledge of computers, technical problems, and slow network times were problematic. In relation to language use, Odendaal (2001) also found that texts should also cater for the needs of English second and third language speakers.

South African studies also explore the use of ICT as an outreach tool. Keats *et al* (2001) investigated the Internet as an outreach tool at the University of the Western Cape in order to address three challenges facing the university: declining student enrolment; attracting and servicing adult learners; and competing in the global marketplace. Outreach projects in the form of Biology projects were produced for their website, and guestbook comments were analysed. In the period 1997- 1999, however, they found that the site was being used primarily by American, and to a lesser extent, South African teachers, learners and parents<sup>43</sup>.

Research in the field of ICT has also emanated from Technology Units at universities such as the one located at the University of Cape Town. The Multimedia Education Group located at the Technology Unit conducts research into ICT-related issues such as policy, access, and pedagogy across South Africa. Studies include those by Czerniewicz (2004), Czerniewicz and Carr (2005), and Czerniewicz and Brown (2005), as was mentioned in Chapter 1. Their work covers a range of issues relevant to the South African context, including the possibilities and challenges of implementing computers for

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<sup>43</sup> This might be attributed to the South African teachers', learners' and parents' lack of ICT-access.

teaching and learning at the University of Cape Town in South Africa (Czerniewicz, 2004); creating communities of practice among educational technologists and practitioners in developing contexts (Czerniewicz and Carr, 2005); and issues concerning the digital divide, where the researchers describe a model of technological access and practices (Czerniewicz and Brown, 2005). The studies are relevant to my work, concerned as it is with the use of technology in a developing context, from the perspective of a communities of practice framework in the higher education context.

Given the scarcity of research in ICT and English language and education in South Africa, I decided to focus on online learning from the perspective of English Language Studies and its educational implications. I am concerned with how ICT is being utilised from a socio-cultural perspective, in particular the extent to which it facilitates communities of practice, and the extent to which participants engage with and interact in the medium in the English classroom. To this end I explore how participants make meaning of the social issues raised in the English course readings in their written postings, while Chapter 3 examines theories relevant to my interests in more depth. In order to clarify the concept 'online learning' as used in this thesis, some definition of the term is necessary at this point.

### **2.3 Defining online learning**

Terminology such as e-learning, Internet learning, distributed learning, networked learning, tele-learning, virtual learning, computer-assisted learning, web-based learning, and distance learning have been commonly used to refer to online learning in the

international context (Ally, 2004; Kearsley, 1998). In his use of the term ‘online learning’ Ally (2004) cites Carliner (1999), who defines the concept as educational material presented on a computer, and Khan (1997), who defines it as an approach that delivers instruction to a remote audience, using the Web as a medium. However, online learning involves more than the presentation and delivery of materials. Ally (2004) argues that the learner and the learning process should be the focus, and therefore defines online learning as:

The use of the Internet to access learning materials; to interact with the content, instructor, and other learners, and to obtain support during the learning process, in order to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from personal experience (Ally, 2004:5).

As opposed to Kearsley (1998) referred to in Chapter 1, who also regards online learning as learning *via* a computer, Ally (2004) expands the notion to include how students make meaning and interact with other participants in the online environment. This interpretation appears more appropriate for my study because it transcends the notion of online learning as merely an ICT-based resource or tool.

In his website on e-learning, Stockley (2005) proposes that the term e-learning<sup>44</sup> is actually the overarching concept because it involves the use of a greater variety of multimedia modes of delivery such as computers, DVDs, CDs, as well as electronic devices such as mobile phones. In his view online learning is restricted to the use of the Net. In my project I utilise e-mail and the Net to support my web course, and I also refer students to additional websites. Because I do not utilise other multimedia devices such as CD-Roms or DVDs, I use the term ‘online learning’, rather than e-learning, drawing on

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<sup>44</sup> Also referred to as elearning, or eLearning.

the key concepts of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), which is developed later in this chapter.

The emergence of online applications in the teaching-learning context has undoubtedly introduced a paradigm shift from the conventional face-to-face classroom to electronic applications in teaching and learning. The shift has highlighted similarities and differences between the two modes of delivery, as is expanded in the next section.

#### **2.4 Distinctions between face-to-face and electronic online classrooms**

Burgstahler (1997) makes distinctions between the traditional face-to-face classroom and the electronic classroom in terms of resources. The primary instructional tools of the conventional classroom include texts, slides, lectures, printed handouts, products to demonstrate, and the classroom. The primary learning vehicles of electronic classrooms include texts, electronic mail, electronic distribution lists, and a Web server. The following section compares key aspects of both types of classrooms: teacher presence, discussion and collaboration, and access to resources.

The teacher is a physical presence in the face-to-face classroom, as opposed to the online environment where he/she is a virtual presence. In an online environment, Janks (2005)<sup>45</sup> for example, expresses marvel at how she is able to teach students in Australia from her home in Johannesburg, South Africa. In conventional classrooms, teachers may work in teams, whilst in electronic online classes teachers may be hundreds, even thousands of

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<sup>45</sup> Janks (2005) discusses the M.Ed course in Critical Literacy that she teaches online from South Africa to students at the University of South Australia.

kilometres apart, and yet are able to teach and team-teach simultaneously. The teacher may not be a physical presence, but is present as a facilitator who prepares and distributes materials, sets classwork tasks, encourages discussion and evaluates tasks.

It is also possible to include guests, specialists, and visitors in virtual classes, as is possible in the face-to-face situation<sup>46</sup>. Specialists and guests may also be included from anywhere in the world, and it is possible for them to participate over a longer period of time as traditional constraints such as the time available disappear. A guest might make input such as posting readings or comments at any time s/he is available from his/her office or home, without the cost of plane tickets and other constraints. Participants may retrieve and respond to messages at a time convenient to them. Nor are common times and venues necessary for students to meet, as course material can be distributed electronically *via* the course distribution list and accessed at any point in time.

In relation to classroom discussion and collaboration, online discussions held *via* discussion threads and bulletin boards are possible. Discussion threads occur when one e-mail message may be sent to all linked e-mail addresses simultaneously. On a bulletin board, a message may be placed on a central web site, for instance, and can be accessed and responded to by readers at any time (Warschauer, Turbee and Roberts, 1996). Generally, students may be encouraged to participate in discussions by submitting at least one comment per lesson. This prevents the possibility of certain students dominating discussions, or 'lurkers' who do not participate in discussions. As participants become more familiar and comfortable with the technology, they tend to participate more

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<sup>46</sup> Refer, for example to the study conducted by Hodgkinson-Williams and Mostert (2005).

frequently (Albrekston, 1995; Karyan and Crowe, 1997; Johnson and Huff, 2000; Nunan in Kahmi-Stein, 2000). Albrekston (1995) also found that computer-mediated discussion enabled shy students, in particular, to participate more than in the face-to-face situation. Johnson and Huff's (2000) study of campus-based and distance Social Work students revealed that the students perceived online discussion a useful tool for collaboration, and that it minimised feelings of isolation.

In relation to resources, students traditionally visit the library in order to access books, journals and other material. In electronic classrooms, material may be placed on the class website, and students also have unlimited access to the Web in order to access information. In the traditional class, assignments are physically handed in and assessed, whereas electronic assignments are submitted *via* e-mail and may be posted as 'model' work on the website for other students to read as well. This, of course, with the writers' permission, since there are ethical considerations when using learners' work as models for public viewing. Assessment and feedback may also be provided electronically.

Despite the benefits listed above, many questions arise about the challenges posed by online classes. Foremost, critique is directed at the extent to which students and teachers require face-to-face contact. Several researchers have established that the lack of personal contact has not hampered student performance in any way, although some participants have noted feelings of isolation (Czerniewicz, 2001<sup>47</sup>). Others, such as Zafeiriou *et al* (2001), Cunningham (2000), Lally and Barret (1999), and Johnson and Huff (2000) have

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<sup>47</sup> In her study as a participant in an online class involving students from the UK and South Africa, Czerniewicz (2001) comments on feeling isolated, and recommends that facilitators use modes that encourage participant collaboration.

praised the benefits because they found the nature of online classes sufficiently collaborative. However, Lally and Barret (1999) add caution that the construction of an effective online community may depend on the provision of adequate opportunities for socio-emotional discourse and the establishment of co-operative frameworks for learning. It is also felt by teachers that more opportunities for reflection should be encouraged in online communities, and to encourage interaction. A recent posting to the TESLCA-L listserv questioning the effectiveness of online classrooms in favour of face-to-face classrooms, for example, drew several positive and negative responses worldwide, confirming the ongoing debate in the area (TESLCA-L listserv, 9-11 September 2005).

Another challenge is whether computer applications can help improve student performance in basic language skills areas. Various factors need to be examined. Cunningham (2000) posits that one needs to look into the specific skill areas, grade levels, and content areas in which computer applications are most effective. It is also important to examine the kinds and levels of students who seem to benefit from the use of computers, as is the need to look at the kinds of computer applications that are most effective. Student attitudes also need to be studied, in order to determine whether the use of computer applications can improve students' attitudes towards school and learning, and whether improved attitudes necessarily result in better performance. Equally important is research into teacher attitudes. As mentioned earlier in the section on international studies, Koszalka's (2001) study of teacher-attitudes suggests that teachers who participate actively in a computer-mediated environment have a more positive attitude to its use in the classroom. An especially significant challenge is the need for

work in the South African context, particularly in relation to issues around the acquisition of English as a second or additional language. From a socio-cultural perspective, any work situated in the English language classroom context warrants some consideration of communication, dialogue and interaction in that context. The section that follows explores computer-mediated communication, which is highlighted as being essential in online environments.

### **2.5 Computer-mediated communication: Facilitating dialogue and democracy**

The term ‘computer mediated communication’ (CMC) was coined by Hilz and Turoff (1978 in Murray, 2000) in their study of computer conferencing. The term includes communication *via* e-mail, bulletin boards, chat rooms, discussion lists and the WWW. It refers to the ways in which telecommunications technologies have merged with computers and computer networks to give us new tools to support teaching and learning (Brush and Uden, 2000), or, in Herring’s view: “communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers” (Herring, 1996a:1). CMC therefore provides a means to develop and implement new forms of collaboration among groups of people, regardless of their location.

As alluded to briefly in Chapter 1, the two main types of CMC are synchronous communication (where users communicate with one another in real time via chat programmes or video conferencing) and asynchronous communication (which occurs where there may be a delay between when the message is sent, and when it is responded to, such as e-mail, discussion threads and bulletin boards). Asynchronous communication

does not depend on participants being online simultaneously. Learners are allowed more opportunities for productivity and participation because of time and location independence and new access opportunities. Learning therefore no longer requires exclusively face-to-face social interaction, a point supported by Blakely (in Zafeiriou *et al*, 2001:2), who says “Learning is becoming both a personal and participative activity. It is no longer something that requires a group activity, in which participation is limited to the immediate social interaction”.

Empirical evidence suggests that CMC has positive effects on facilitating the acquisition of skills such as writing and discussion (Cunningham, 2000; Warschauer and Healy, 1998), as well as democratising the teaching-learning environment (Warschauer, 1996a; Huff and King, 1988; Tella, 1991). Warschauer and Healy (1998), in their study on student attitudes to online e-mail writing tasks, find that students maintain a more positive attitude to online writing tasks, which could improve their general writing skills.

In relation to classroom interaction and discussion, students sometimes do not interact extensively with their peers or teachers in face-to-face classrooms. Harman (in Warschauer, 1996a) found that electronic discussion helped students increase their amount of communication with the teacher and with other students as well. CMC is also said to have a more equalising effect than face to-face discussion. This is in relation to participation (such as gender-based participation), as well as social status. Face-to-face discussion may be unbalanced, with just one or two participants dominating the floor, whereas students who traditionally did not participate in face-to-face discussion tend to

participate more in electronic discussion (Warschauer, 1996a)<sup>48</sup>. Warschauer (2004b) also cites studies where student participation was found to be greater in three areas: student talk versus teacher talk, directional focus of student talk, and equality of student participation<sup>49</sup>.

In relation to participation it has been found that electronic communication brought in an equalising opportunity among male and female students in the classroom. McGuire, Kiesler and Siegel (1987) show that women make the first proposal as often as men in electronic discussion, compared to only one-fifth as often in face-to-face discussion. Tella's (1991) study of Finnish girls supports the issue of gender-based participation. She demonstrates that although Finnish girls traditionally have less access to and proficiency with computers than boys, when girls were participants in an international English language e-mail project, they participated as much as the boys. Herring's (1996b) study, however, found gender-based differences in male and female participation: he shows that a male discourse style (for example, debate and freedom from rules) dominates the Net. He shows that female CMC is characterised by politeness, support, consideration and appreciation, and that in his study, males participated more frequently than females. When the females did participate they were ignored or criticised. Allen (in Murray,

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<sup>48</sup> In Warschauer's (1996a) comparison of the equality of student participation in face-to-face and electronic discussion, each mode was correlated to factors such as nationality, language ability, time spent in the United States and student attitudes. Warschauer (1996a) finds that students participate more equally in electronic discussion and use language that is lexically and syntactically more formal and complex than in face-to-face discussion.

<sup>49</sup> Warschauer (2004b) cites studies by Chun (1994), Kelm (1992), Kern (1995) and Sullivan and Pratt (1996).

2000), on the other hand, argues that women have more positive attitudes to CMC than men, especially in terms of e-mail<sup>50</sup>.

CMC is also thought of as democratising the learning environment because it is an accessible medium that reduces social status cues (such as accent, handwriting, voice quality, appearance, race) (Herring, 1993b). In another study, Huff and King (1988) demonstrate that topics proposed by lower-status group members were accepted equally in electronic discussion, but were only rarely accepted in face-to-face discussion.

Thus, to a great extent, CMC can facilitate more equitable participation opportunities among students. Lally and Barret (1999: 151) refer to this as the “equalisation of community members”. Their study of student teachers established that the absence of non-verbal cues inhibited some of the participants. They also found that communication anxiety relating to technical fears (such as if a message was sent or not), and message inappropriacy, was felt by some of the participants.

From the above discussion it is evident that students and teachers with access to ICT have alternatives to face-to-face classroom participation. However, online learning can be done ‘for better or for worse’. It is necessary to have substantial interaction and communication among participants for successful online learning to take place. Interaction enriches the online environment, dispelling the view held by critics that the online environment is sterile and impersonal (Kearsley, 1998). Research on the effectiveness of computers and new technologies in language teaching and learning is an

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<sup>50</sup> Allen (in Murray, 2000) shows that women feel more comfortable with the electronic medium than men.

ongoing process. What can be done with computers and teachers' and learners' responses to technology is constantly changing, however, as more research is conducted we get closer to the role technology can or should play. This is vital and it is exactly what my study attempts to do. As Lee (2000) says, if properly implemented, the use of Net technology contributes significantly to experiential learning, motivation, enhanced student achievement, authentic materials for study, greater interaction, individualisation, independence from a single source of information and global understanding.

Having examined some of the key debates and evidence surrounding the differences between face-to-face and online classrooms (teacher presence, discussion and collaboration, and access to resources), as well as issues relevant to CMC (teacher-presence, collaboration, and democracy), I would like to draw specific attention to the emergence of computer-assisted language learning (CALL). In sections to follow I trace the route taken by CALL in relation to language acquisition theories by deconstructing behaviourist, communicative, and integrative approaches. Thereafter I examine specific Net-based strategies that are relevant for the English classroom.

## **2.6 Exploring computer-assisted language learning (CALL)**

Computer-assisted learning (CAL) software was originally used for stand-alone desktop computers. Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) is the application of CAL to language learning and teaching. Cunningham (2000) views CALL as an eclectic field that borrows from CAL and Applied Linguistics. Singhal (1997) describes how, historically, CALL applications such as language laboratories that comprised a series of booths with a cassette deck, microphone and headphone were used in language acquisition in the 1960s

and 1970s. Students followed instructions and were monitored by the teacher at a central control panel. This was based on a behaviourist stimulus-response model. The premise was that the more the students practised drills, the better they would acquire the language. The idea is based on the principles of Skinner (1953) who saw language acquisition as behaviour. The views on language acquisition have since shifted in more recent times, with acquisition seen as an interactive and communicative process that integrates the various skills. Thus, while the language laboratory method succeeded in linking language and technology, it was pedagogically unsound, leaving students bored, and with little interaction between them and the teacher. This is not to say that the behaviourist approach is dispensable, a point to which I return in the following section of this chapter. However, although CALL applications had their beginnings in language laboratories, they are not so confined. The programmes are extensive, as is indicated in Figure 2.6.1:

*Figure 2.6.1: CALL Programmes*

<b>General category</b>	<b>Sub-category</b>
Tools	Text processors Voice processing programmes Communications programmes
Instructional programmes	Drills and practice Tutorials Exploratory programmes Simulations, games, hypermedia
Databases	Information sources Text corpuses Hypermedia
Testing programmes	Computer-based language tests

Adapted from Cunningham (2000)

As stated in the previous section, CALL originated and was initially utilised in the behaviourist tradition with drill-like exercises. However, a marked transition followed, as a result of shifts in how language was taught. These shifts were characterised by a move from memorised drill dialogues to more communicative, creative self-expression and the

negotiation of meaning (Warschauer, 2000d). Intrinsic too, is comprehensible input<sup>51</sup>, the incorporation of authentic materials<sup>52</sup> and realia<sup>53</sup>. While initially placing emphasis on tutorials, simulations and tests, the move has been towards human-to-human communication, giving language learners with Net access unlimited access to native speakers and other language learners the world over.

Historically, the 40-year period characterising CALL may be divided into three main stages, all of which parallel shifts in language acquisition theory: behaviourist or structural CALL, communicative CALL, and integrative CALL (Warschauer, 1996b; Warschauer and Healy, 1998). The stages are not as clearly distinct as they appear to be, as there are overlaps and synergies between the stages. One therefore needs to be cautious in describing these stages in an evolutionary manner, which considers ‘most recent’ best. There are strengths in the behaviourist approach, for example, that may work successfully with particular types of learners or in particular contexts. Certain students may for instance benefit from repeated pronunciation tasks. Therefore it would be short-sighted to dismiss a particular approach completely in favour of another. The following table (Figure 2.6.2), as adapted from Warschauer and Healy (1998), reflects the journey taken by CALL over the years more conclusively:

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<sup>51</sup> Comprehensible input refers to language pitched slightly above the level of the language learners’ ability (Richards *et al*, 1985).

<sup>52</sup> Authentic materials have the qualities of natural speech or writing. Texts may be taken from newspapers, restaurant menus, and so on (Richards *et al*, 1985).

<sup>53</sup> Realia are actual objects or artefacts such as photographs and costumes that are brought into the classroom to facilitate language acquisition (Richards *et al*, 1985).

Figure 2.6.2: History of CALL

Stage	1960s-1970s Behaviourist/ Structural Call	1980s-1990s Communicative Call	21 <sup>st</sup> Century Integrative Call
Technology	Mainframe	Personal computers	Multimedia and Internet
English-teaching paradigm	Grammar-translation and audio-lingual	Communicative language teaching	Content-based English for Specific Purposes/English for Academic Purposes
View of language	Structural (a formal structural system)	Cognitive (a mentally-constructed system)	Socio-cognitive (developed in social interaction)
Principal use of computers	Drill and practice	Communicative exercises	Authentic discourse
Principle objective	Accuracy	Accuracy and fluency	Accuracy, fluency and agency

Adapted from Warschauer and Healy (1998)

### 2.6.1 Behaviourist CALL

The first form of CALL in the 1960s and 1970s featured repetitive language drills, or the drill and practice method (Lee, 2000). The model, referred to by Warschauer (1996b:1) as “drill and kill” was based on the behaviourist model of learning, with the computer being used as a mechanical tutor. The model was used mainly for drills, translation tests, and grammar instruction. As stated earlier in this section, despite critique of the behaviourist approach (for instance, by Stevens, 1989), CALL drills may still be used today, the rationale being, according to Warschauer (1996b: 1) that:

- repeated exposure to the same material is beneficial to learning;
- computers are ideal for carrying out drills. Machines do not get bored presenting the same material, and offer non-judgemental feedback;
- computers can present material on an individualised basis, thus allowing students to work at their own pace.

Several CALL tutoring systems were originally designed based around behaviourist principles, the PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Options) system being one of the earliest and most popular. The PLATO system is an e-learning and computer-based instructional system which offers a range of self-paced programmes in

reading, writing, mathematics, science, social studies and life and job skills to learners ranging from pre-school to adult level. The reading and writing programmes, which were initially implemented in 1963, utilised vocabulary drills, grammar explanations and drills and tests. Behaviourist CALL fell out of favour in the late 1970s and 1980s because the behaviourist approach to language learning was rejected on theoretical and pedagogical grounds. This led to the second phase of CALL, based on the communicative approach to language teaching that was prominent in the 1970s and 1980s (for example: Hymes, 1971).

#### 2.6.2 *Communicative CALL*

Communicative CALL emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a reaction to the behaviourist approach. Proponents of communicative CALL, such as Stevens (1989) and Underwood (1984), felt that CALL should focus more on *using* forms rather than on the forms themselves, that is it should allow for more authentic communication. Communicative CALL corresponded to theories that recognised that learning was a creative process of discovery and expression. Underwood (1984) made the following premises about communicative CALL: it teaches grammar implicitly, rather than explicitly; it allows students to generate original utterances rather than prefabricated utterances; it evaluates everything that students do, or rewards them with instant congratulatory messages; it avoids telling students that they are wrong, and allows for multiple responses; it uses only the target language; and it creates an environment in which using the target language feels natural and authentic.

Stevens (1989) suggested that CALL courses should build on the learners' intrinsic motivation, and that they should also allow for interactivity. Programmes included activities that stimulated discussion, writing, and critical thinking, and communicative CALL programmes appeared to be superior to behaviourist programmes. However, by the late 1980s, many teachers felt that communicative CALL was not working as well as it could have been (Lee, 2000). It was felt that the communicative approach led to language being taught compartmentally, albeit within a communicative framework. This led to a more integrative, networked approach, and the challenge was to design integrative CALL programmes that were more content-driven and project-based.

### *2.6.3 Integrative CALL and network-based language teaching*

Because communicative CALL was critiqued in certain spheres for using the computer in an “*ad hoc* and disconnected fashion” (Kenning and Kenning in Lee, 2000:6), teachers were urged to move away from a cognitive view to a more socio-cognitive one that advocated real language use in meaningful, authentic contexts. Integrative CALL, which is based on the use of multimedia and the Net, seeks to integrate the language learning skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, as well as technology more meaningfully into language teaching and learning, giving the learner more agency. Multimedia allows a variety of media such as text, graphics, sound, animation and video to be accessed at a single machine. Multimedia includes hypermedia, that is, all multimedia resources are linked, enabling learners to take control of the learning situation with the ‘click of a mouse’. Hypermedia provides advantages for language learning in the following ways: it creates a more authentic language learning environment, where

listening, for example is combined with seeing, as in the real world; it is quite simple to integrate skills into a single activity because of the variety of media; students have more control over the learning process because they can work at their own pace, as well as go forward and backward in a non-linear fashion, as the links allow and as they need to (they can spend more time with aspects they need to, and skip certain aspects altogether as they need); and finally, hypermedia focuses on content, language, and learning strategies simultaneously (Warschauer, 1996b).

Derewianka (1993) speaks about hypermedia<sup>54</sup> changing three perspectives in language learning: text, author, and reader. The shift in how we view text lies in that it is no longer linear. Hyperlinks allow for the reader to make choices because of its non-linear form (though on the other hand, some may find this distracting). In her view this allows readers to engage more critically with the text. In terms of authorship, any author who is published on the Net has the possibility of a worldwide audience, which she says motivates language learners.

Innovative teachers may use the Net to their advantage by utilising it to help create a learning environment where authentic communication is integrated into all aspects of a course. Mak (1995), for instance speaks about the Net as a tool, which provides opportunities for instruction, research, collaboration, and publication. Students can search through Net files and access materials such as newspaper and magazine articles, radio broadcasts and videos (Brown, 1999; Pathak, 2001; Scotellaro, 2002; Pickard, 2002). They can then publish their own texts or materials on the Web. This can be done

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<sup>54</sup> I do not make use of hypermedia or multimedia in this study, but draw on the concepts for clarity.

collaboratively, within the same class, or by linking up with classes at other institutions, in other countries even. Students can then provide feedback on one another's work, like in the case of Santos' class, described by Warschauer (2002) as an example of an integrated approach<sup>55</sup>.

Use can also be made of real-time audio and audio-visual chatting, such as through NetPhone<sup>56</sup> and CUSeeME<sup>57</sup> technological tools, which enable participants to see and hear one another while communicating. Audio chatting technology involves sound systems that may be accessed via the Net, where participants may listen to one another. Video chatting enables participants to see one another while chatting. However, these are not being used extensively at the moment in developing countries such as South Africa, largely due to lack of access to the relevant technology in educational institutions, cost factors, and limited bandwidth, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Kern and Warschauer (2000) and O'Dowd (2004) make a further distinction between CALL and network-based language teaching (NBLT). NBLT involves the use of computers connected to one another, where human communication is the focus, rather than the tutorials, drills and simulations, which are the focus of CALL. NBLT utilizes non-synchronous tools such as e-mail and discussion threads, and can also use synchronous tools such as chat rooms and video-conferencing. O'Dowd (2004:112)

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<sup>55</sup> As I explain in Chapter 4, in my study students were able to utilise online Net sources and participate in communicative activities *via* discussion threads on web courses. The creation of Web pages was, however, technologically beyond their ability at the time.

<sup>56</sup> Phone calls that can be made over the Internet.

<sup>57</sup> A system that enables video conferencing; that is participants are able too see and talk to one another simultaneously.

summarises NBLT as beneficial for foreign language teaching for the following reasons: it supports interaction and reflection; it encourages equality of participation among learners; it provides an authentic environment for learners; it facilitates collaborative construction of knowledge; it allows learners to work with hypermedia; and it facilitates intercultural contact. The context of NBLT has not, according to Kern and Warschauer (2000) been studied sufficiently, or in depth, but they emphasise the need for a holistic, socio-collaborative approach that goes beyond a study of linguistic features. They say:

Network-based language teaching does not represent a particular technique, method, or approach. It is a constellation of ways which students communicate via computer networks and interpret and construct online texts and multimedia documents, all as part of a process of steadily-increasing engagement in new discourse communities (Kern and Warschauer, 2000: 11).

Although computers can serve a multitude of purposes, as indicated above, it must be remembered that value lies in how the technology is used, as we are reminded by Garret (in Warschauer, 1996b):

The use of the computer does not constitute a method, rather it is a medium in which a variety of methods, approaches, and pedagogical philosophies may be implemented. The effectiveness of CALL cannot reside in the medium itself, but only in how it is put to use (Garret, 1996)<sup>58</sup>.

## **2.7 Some challenges in South Africa and beyond**

Despite the benefits of ICT and online learning as discussed in the previous section, and given the minimal incentives in South Africa, technology has not made a great impact on education thus far<sup>59</sup>. Teachers are not yet suitably technically proficient to make their own programmes, and commercial developers do not have the necessary pedagogical background to ensure that the programmes are of suitable quality. South African teachers

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<sup>58</sup> Cited in Warschauer (1996b: 7).

<sup>59</sup> There is some work on the impact of multimedia such as 3-D games, as well as the development of digital archives.

are also not yet offered sufficient training courses in order to work within a technological environment, as was found in research conducted by the South African Institute of Distance Education (SAIDE, 2003; also *Draft White Paper on e-Education*, 2004). Computers are also not yet intelligent enough to be fully interactive, as required in an integrative approach.

Another reason for the minimal impact of technology in the educational context is that learners are not adequately computer literate. Thus I selected an approach that is partly communicative and partly network-based to implement in my study. I was further limited in that the higher education institution selected for study did not have adequate facilities to utilise for a fully integrative approach, and it was beyond budgetary constraints at the university to install additional hardware and software at the time of this research. Such decisions are important to consider in the context of a developing country when designing a project of this nature.

The specific sources of Internet-based applications relevant for use in the English classroom and which are relevant to this thesis are described and critiqued in sections to follow.

## **2.8 Sources of Internet-based applications**

As maintained in this thesis thus far, the use of Net enhanced applications in the language classroom is not new, but is an emerging development in South Africa. It is necessary to examine what has been done elsewhere, as is suggested in the SAIDE Report (2000)

*Lessons in the applications of educational technologies in South Africa*, in order not to perpetuate mistakes. For example, the Report cites instances where technology-based projects were unsuccessful because of their high operating costs, the problems with adaptation to local conditions, and the lack of skilled personnel. The Report maintains that South Africa appears to be repeating the same mistakes as other developing countries, rather than ‘leap-frogging’ them, despite the local and international experiences. Chisholm *et al* (2004) and Warschauer (2002a; 2002b, 2003, 2004b; 2005, in press)<sup>60</sup> also cite such common weaknesses in the implementation of technology in developing countries. Ultimately, success depends on the teacher’s ability to integrate technology in the classroom and the curriculum:

The intrepid and creative teacher will venture into this virtual realm, find authentic resources, and use them to make the second language classroom a marvellous place to learn (LeLoup and Ponteiro, 2000:4).

There are several Net-based applications that can be used in the English classroom, provided of course, that the infrastructure and resources are available. These applications are described by LeLoup and Ponteiro (2000), and Marcos (1994). To provide an overview of the field, and because this research is located within the context of a developing country, where ICT-use is still an emerging practice, I include descriptions of the current practices in the following section, although I have only chosen to implement

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<sup>60</sup> Warschauer (2002a; 2002b; 2003, 2004; 2005, in press) describes these weaknesses in three case studies: India’s ‘Hole in the Wall’ project, where computer kiosks were introduced in streets for children to use in an attempt at non-invasive education. They were not taught to use the technology and subsequently did not use the technology to learn, rather to play games and paint. In Ireland’s Information Age Town project, towns were encouraged to submit technology plans to show how they would incorporate technology into the town. The town that won extensive ICT systems, could not fully operate the systems because they were not trained sufficiently in its use. The town that was the runner-up won ICT to a lesser value but was more successful because the people focussed more on training. In Egypt’s Model Lab project, a US-funded lab was established at an Egyptian university. However, the laboratory remained closed for bureaucratic reasons, and because staff and students were not given suitable training and access to the equipment.

the use of the Net, e-mail, and discussion threads in my online course, which are less intensive than full web-use for the developing country context. Each application is discussed, examples are provided, and studies in the area are provided where they are available. The following applications are described and explained in the order that they are listed<sup>61</sup>:

- e-mail
- electronic lists
- electronic journals and weblogs
- WWW
- file transfer
- streaming audio and video
- remote access to libraries and databases
- chat, audio and video conferencing
- Web course management

### 2.8.1 *E-mail*

The most commonly used online tools are e-mail, bulletin boards, and chat rooms. Of these tools e-mail is the most commonly used Net application. It allows individuals from anywhere in the world to communicate with others without the constraints of time zones. Messages can be sent at the sender's convenience, regardless of whether the receiver is present at that time. The message can be opened and responded to at the recipient's convenience. E-mail is used by educators around the world, and language teachers in particular can integrate e-mail based activities such as e-pal (electronic penpal) programmes into their curricula to encourage student interaction. Learners across the world may be matched depending on the learning context, or needs (such as course of study, level of English, age of learners, and so on), through several contact websites, or by requests through listservers. Two such sites are the Epals site ([www.epals.com](http://www.epals.com)) and

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<sup>61</sup> The applications listed are not exhaustive, as they are constantly changing and upgrading. The list serves the purpose of providing current information.

the Intercultural Exchange and Cross-cultural Communication (IECC) site ([www.iecc.org](http://www.iecc.org)). Please refer to screenshots in Figures 2.8.1 and 2.8.2 below:

Figure 2.8.1: Epals homepage

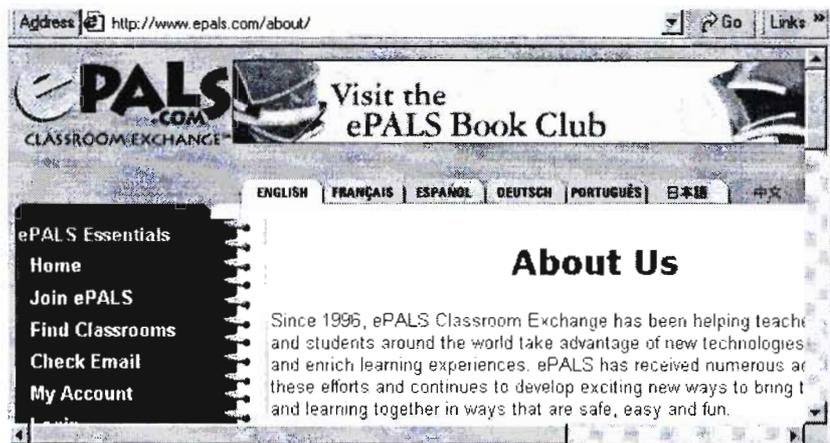
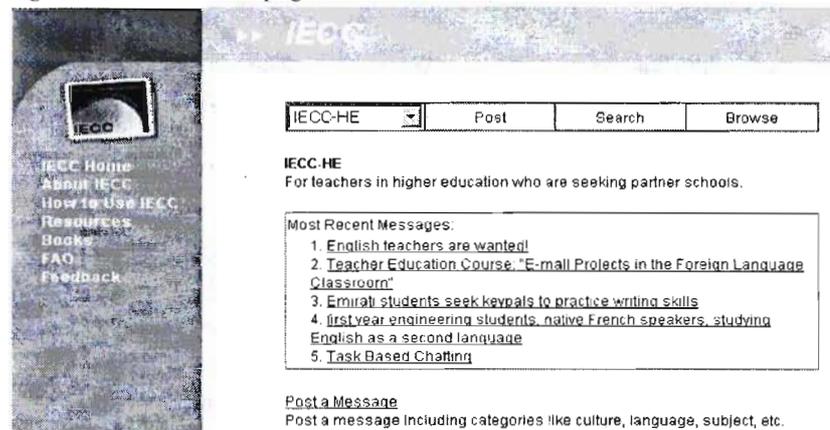


Figure 2.8.2: IECC homepage



Both sites offer teachers and learners a secure environment in which to communicate and work on collaborative projects. I included in my pilot case study an e-pal project that was conducted with undergraduate students *via* the IECC site, the details of which will be presented in the data analysis in Chapter 6. Several other studies of e-mail use have been conducted in the field, such as those by Ho (2000), Sakar (2001), Mello (1998), Liao Chao (1999), Jor and Mak (1994), Lee (2004) and Greenfield (2003). The following

summary of relevant research provides a cross-section of studies conducted in the field using e-mail and e-pal projects. For convenience, the research has been tabulated according to the relevant study and its findings:

Figure 2.8.3: Summary of research findings of e-mail exchange projects

Researcher	Method	Findings and/ or recommendations
Ho (2000)	International collaborative project between two schools in Singapore and Birmingham.	Participants' confidence, awareness and understanding of both cultures were enhanced. Their language skills and creativity were developed.
Sakar (2001)	E-mail exchange between Turkish students at the University of Bahcesehir and other international foreign language students. The study was based on Hymes' (1974) communicative approach, and the intercultural communication approach (Belisle, 1996; Berenfield, 1996).	The project provided an opportunity for reading and writing practice, and had a positive impact on cultural awareness.
Mello (1998)	International collaborative exchange between students in Sao Paolo, Korea, and Japan.	The study recommends that teachers must have the same objectives and maintain contact for the duration of the project. Students should be paired with students of a similar age and level of English to prevent drop-outs and lack of interest. Student training is essential.
Liao (1999)	Exchanges between students in Taiwan, and partner countries including Australia, Germany, Ireland, Romania, United States. The study used Hymes' (1974) communicative language teaching model.	Recommendations include technical training for students. Students also need to be taught how to ask questions, in particular, those of a cross-cultural nature.
Jor and Mak (1994)	Two international projects involving 250 students from eleven universities. The students participated in an integrated writing course.	Their recommendations include having a good mailing list, adequate access to resources, adequate time to learn and reflect on writing, advance planning, good matches in terms of levels and objectives. They also emphasise teacher collaboration, integration of e-mail into the curriculum, and willingness to embrace new technology. Students wrote for a real audience.
Lee (2004)	The study examined learner perspectives on networked collaborative interaction. Participants included native and non-native speakers of Spanish at the Universities of New Hampshire and George Mason. Strategies included e-mail, discussion threads, and bulletin boards using the Blackboard <sup>62</sup> web management system.	Participants were able to produce a wide range of discourse structures and develop grammatical competence and L2 lexicons. The only reported adverse effect was because of the different time zones timing was not appropriate for synchronous exchanges.
Greenfield (2003)	The study examined secondary ESL students' attitudes and perceptions of a collaborative e-mail exchange project between a class in Hong Kong and one in Iowa. The purpose of the exchange was for learners to participate in an integrated writing course.	She found that students' reading, writing, grammar and listening skills improved. She further reports that the Taiwanese students perceived that their confidence grew as a result of the project.

<sup>62</sup> Blackboard, like Nicenet and WebCT is a Web course management system.

From Figure 2.8.3 it is evident that practitioners and participants across the globe are demonstrating an interest in e-mail exchange projects. Of particular interest, the findings indicate that skills and competencies in writing, speaking, reading, listening and grammar improve. However, some of the studies rely on self-report data, which may not be generalisable. On a positive note, cross-cultural awareness also appears to improve. An obvious difficulty is establishing common times for synchronous exchanges, such as using chat rooms, if participants are located in different time zones. Researchers recommend, however, that participants have an interest in the use of technology, and that teachers maintain contact during the course of the project. Other key recommendations include training for teachers and learners, as well as integration with the curriculum, rather than stand-alone projects. Distance learning is also reportedly enhanced by e-mail applications, where e-mail has been found to facilitate communication and interaction (Odendaal, 2001).

E-mail can therefore be used creatively in the English classroom. However, e-mail, like other forms of technology, will not solve language problems. It depends on the teacher to develop ways of utilising it in the classroom to satisfy specific goals, and based on learners' needs (Warschauer, 1995). Students may be disoriented if they are not very proficient at using computers and e-mail, which is particularly true in the context of developing countries.

To summarise the above findings and recommendations, e-mail exchanges in the teaching-learning situation are reported to motivate students and foster positive attitudes to language learning and the cultural beliefs of others. Reading and writing skills, well as grammatical and L2 lexical structures, are said to improve. Concerns discussed by Moran and Hawisher (1998) and Warschauer (2004a) about the casual

nature of online writing, as well as its graphic (as opposed to text) dominance that could be detrimental to language acquisition, are dispelled by Danet (2001) and Moran and Hawisher (1998) who compare e-mails to the different genres of writing. For example, students would be taught that e-mail conversations are far more casual and social than the formal language requirements of collaborative projects that are going to be published. To this end, Mak (1995) recommends that the language of e-mail be incorporated into English courses, together with how to write clearly, effectively and to tolerate cultural and geographical differences. The findings of the studies on e-mail use, as well as their implications for English teaching and learning are worthy of consideration for teachers wanting to implement similar strategies in their teaching in South Africa, or, in fact, other developing countries. Of note are the findings regarding English language teaching and learning, given the context of English as an additional language in developing countries.

### *2.8.2 Electronic discussion groups and listservs*

Another application of an Internet-based approach is electronic discussion groups or listservs, which use e-mail to provide a forum where people can participate in professional dialogue and share resources. In his Introduction to *E-mail for English Teaching*, Warschauer (1995:1) describes how a teacher in New York, teaching English pronunciation to Spanish speakers needs help from colleagues around the world and posts a question on a listserv. Within half an hour her question is answered. Several lists exist for language teachers, where questions and suggestions may be posted, such as EDNET and EDUTEL (lists which discuss the relationship between computer networking and education), TESL-L (international discussion for ESL teachers), TESLCA-L (international discussion on computer-assisted language

learning), Language Learning Technology International Discussion Forum and the International E-mail Classroom Connection.

Because participation can enhance professional development for teachers, electronic lists provide participants with the 'floor' to network, address common issues and perhaps solve problems. Murphy's (2000) doctoral study bears reference here. She elicited teachers' beliefs about the use of online technology in the teaching of French as a second language on a listserv she created for the purpose of the study. She found that teachers responded positively to the use of listservs, because it gave them the opportunity to interact and communicate. Lee's (2004) study summarised in Figure 2.8.3 also bears reference. She found participation on listservs helped ESL students produce a wide range of discourse structures and develop grammatical competence and L2 lexicons.

### *2.8.3 Electronic academic journals*

Electronic journals can reach a wide readership, and while some are freely available, others require subscription. This is important in countries where access to journals are limited. Articles include links to other sources because of the hypermedia or hypertext nature, making them very accessible. Examples of electronic journals in the field of English language include *Language Learning and Technology (LLT)*, *Teaching English as a Second Language Electronic Journal (TESOL-EJ)*, *Online Educator*, *Calico Journal* and *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, all of which are American-based. Subscriptions and submissions are done electronically. Articles may be submitted, edited and printed electronically, which facilitates the publishing process. African journals include African Journals online ([www.ajol.info](http://www.ajol.info)).

#### 2.8.4 *Student journals and weblogs*

Warschauer (1995) says that for some students approaching a teacher is an intimidating experience if they are shy or lack confidence in speaking English. Journals may help facilitate communication between teacher and students, as well as encourage writing skills. Tillyer's (1993) study, for instance, shows how students maintained greater contact with their teacher via e-mail journals than in regular face-to-face consultation sessions.

The use of print-based dialogue journals to encourage reflection and writing has benefits in ESL learning. However, as Warschauer (1995) comments, weekly submissions and waiting for teacher-feedback is tedious. He says this is facilitated by the use of electronic journals. Wang's (1993) study of student writing in electronic and print format shows that students wrote more, and asked more questions electronically than they did in print medium. Electronic submission permits teachers to respond electronically as well, although it is probably true that teachers who do not return student work timeously, will probably not do so electronically either! Should the teacher wish, public journals may be created (with student permission), where entries may be submitted to a bulletin board for other students to read and comment on, creating student-student interaction as well.

Weblogs, or blogs are web-based publications which are updated regularly by 'bloggers', as the writers are known<sup>63</sup>. They function as online diaries or journals and cover a range of topics and issues such as, but not limited to, politics, education,

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<sup>63</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog> (last accessed 4 May 2006).

topical and social issues, popular media and culture, career and workplace news, and updates on personal lives. Bloggers might include photographs and hyperlinks to related sites, and encourage comments and discussion on their entries.

In the educational context, blogs might be used in a variety of ways. The Wikipedia Encyclopedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>) details how blogs can be used to as an electronic scrapbook for school excursions, where learners can upload photographs, texts, as well as audio and video recordings of places visited. Other uses include online courses, newsletters and teacher training materials. Data available on blogs provide a rich source of research material. Huffaker (2004), for instance, analyses teenage blogs in America to ascertain how teenagers construct their identities in the online medium.

#### 2.8.5 *World Wide Web*

The World Wide Web (WWW), which is a collection of resources and applications on the Internet, is the broadest, most flexible Internet application for language teaching. The multimedia nature of the WWW enables the display of materials in many formats, which is essential for the delivery of authentic texts, images, audio, video, and interactive presentations. However, accessing information on the WWW may be a daunting task. Search engines allow users to access information using key words, with the most likely hits being presented first. Popular search engines include *Yahoo*, *Google*, *Altavista* and *Aardvark*. In the South African context, users can also conduct searches in some of the African languages such as isiZulu and isiXhosa.

### 2.8.6 *File transfer*

File transfer is common across all categories discussed thus far, but is included here as a separate category because of its impact on education. With regard to the transfer of files, these can be downloaded from libraries and databases on the Net. Individuals can also transfer text from place to place. One possibility is that educators can share materials in this way. Writers can also contribute to shared works without leaving their desks. A caution though, is the possibility of plagiarism. Students might download work off the Internet, and pass it off as their own. Warschauer (2004) also describes the possibilities for plagiarism as ranging from buying essays on the Net, to not citing references. While plagiarism is a very real danger, it also creates opportunities for teachers to discuss the issue in relation to academic literacy.

### 2.8.7 *Audio and video technology*

Streaming audio and video technology allow learners to listen to news, sports, weather and music broadcasts throughout the world. The two most common streaming formats, *RealPlayer* and *Media Player* (technology which enable audio broadcasts) can be freely downloaded. Such practices add vastly to any English teacher's repertoire of authentic materials. Pickard (2002), for instance demonstrates how audio and video technology (such as news sites) contribute positively to English second and foreign language classrooms. Students may listen to a news programme as a listening exercise, and summarise the news as a speaking or writing activity. A study conducted by Meskill and Mossop (2000) on teachers' use of ICT in the classroom finds that the use of electronic, audio- and video-texts increased student motivation, and that the role of the instructor shifts from a central one to a peripheral one. Other multimodal devices impacting on education include MP3 players and I-pods, which could be utilized by teachers in English teaching and learning. New vocabulary, for instance,

could be sent as message texts, and quick quizzes could be administered to students via such devices, as is current practice in the teaching of English as a foreign language at Griffith University, in Australia (Levy, 2005).

#### 2.8.8 *Libraries and bibliographies*

Library catalogues and bibliographic resources are available on the Net, thus providing remote access to databases. Examples such as the *Emerald* and *ERIC*<sup>64</sup> databases make it possible for teachers and learners to locate mini-bibliographies and articles online. This option is very useful to researchers, and enables them to search literally hundreds of databases around the world. Researchers are able to retrieve texts and graphics, and save the results on their own computers.

#### 2.8.9 *Real time communication*

Real-time or synchronous communication may take place via chat, conferencing, and messaging programmes. Applications such as *Internet Relay Chat (IRC)*, which refers to chat software that may be installed for online chat over the Net enable synchronous conversation among participants anywhere in the world. Users 'talk' by typing messages, which can be seen by all other users participating in the conversation. Foreign language students can participate in voice conversation, and be seen using conferencing programmes such as *CUSeeMe* and *MSMeeting* that enable participants to see one another while communicating. In a study by Pratt and Sullivan (1994, in Warschauer, 1995), the effects of computer-networking on ESL was studied at the University of Puerto Rico. Two ESL classes were studied, one that met once or twice a week in an online environment, and the other that met in a traditional face-to-face

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<sup>64</sup> The Education Resources Information Centre (*ERIC*), is a free online database of journal and other education literature, and is sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences of the United States Department of Education.

classroom. The researchers found that students participated more in the online environment than in the face-to-face environment, and that the students' writing improved to a greater extent in the online class, when pre-and post-writing tasks were compared. Pratt and Sullivan (1994, in Warschauer, 1995) further found that the online class was more student-centred, while the face-to-face class was teacher-dominated. Similar results were found by Hartman *et al* (1991) and Mabrito (1991, 1992)<sup>65</sup>. Their research shows that less able ESL writing students communicated more in an online environment than in a face-to-face environment, made more input in relation to peer editing, and incorporated more revisions into their own texts (in Warschauer, 1995).

#### 2.8.10 *Web course management systems*

Web course management software is designed to create and manage online courses (Lee, 2004). Web courses can be conducted entirely online<sup>66</sup>, or can also run parallel to traditional face-to-face courses as an extension or support effort, with teachers making course notes, syllabi, glossaries and extended reading available to students. Students may also engage in discussion threads on web courses. Examples of web course management software include *WebCT*<sup>67</sup>, *Blackboard*<sup>68</sup> and *Nicenet*<sup>69</sup>. Because of bandwidth limitations, and the cost involved (*WebCT* for instance requires a licence), instructors may opt for course managers such as *Nicenet* or *Blackboard*.

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<sup>65</sup> Their studies are cited by Warschauer (1995).

<sup>66</sup> Refer, for example, to Janks (2005), where students in Australia participated in a Critical Literacy course, which she facilitated from Johannesburg, South Africa.

<sup>67</sup> Please refer to <http://www.webct.org> for more information.

<sup>68</sup> Please refer to <http://www.blackboard.org> for more information.

<sup>69</sup> Please refer to <http://www.nicenet.org> for more information. Nicenet is also discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, which provides the research design of the project.

As referred to earlier in the section on South African research, one study into Web course management systems in the South African context was done by Cronje and Murdoch (2001), who examined the use of *WebCT* at Rand Afrikaans University in South Africa. They elicited data on the use of the system, training, infrastructure and institutional support. They found that lecturers who had a general interest in technology wanted to keep up with the use of technology in their teaching. Lecturers indicated that it also offered benefits such as increasing the opportunity for interaction, developing students' computer skills and decreasing the administrative burden. Problems included that it took up too much time, it provided little academic interaction with students, staff did not benefit in terms of incentives such as promotion if they used the system, there was not enough support available, participants found the technology intimidating, and that there was too little knowledge about *WebCT* to utilise it optimally at the time.

Another South African study, although not designed around language issues, but on a broader university-wide e-Learning implementation project, Van Der Merwe (2004) evaluated the e-Learning initiatives and *WebCT* use at Stellenbosch University. She used her findings to make recommendations for managing change in higher education, as well as for the integration of ICT at institutional and classroom levels, and finally to improve the e-Learning project at the university. Another study conducted by Muianga (2005), who researched the impact of a Web component in two Masters courses at a university in Mozambique, revealed that students responded positively to blended learning which utilised online and face-to-face strategies.

The use of the Net in the English classroom is not limited to the above applications. The following section expands on some of the associated activities that may be designed by teachers to use in collaboration with the above-mentioned applications.

#### *2.8.11 Online activities*

Having provided the core Net-based applications relevant to the ESL class (e-mail, electronic lists, electronic journals and weblogs, WWW, file transfer, streaming audio and video, remote access to libraries and databases, chat, audio and video conferencing, and Web course management), there are various recommended activities for the English classroom in particular, such as those recommended by Pathak (2001), Pickard (2002), Brown (1999) and Mak (1995): treasure hunts, web quests, writing online newspapers and magazines, listening activities, puzzles and movie reviews. Such activities may be designed by teachers, and contribute positively to collaborative learning, as well as critical evaluation skills.

From the above applications and activities, it is evident that there are differences between conventional and web-based applications to language teaching and learning, however, both essentially have the same objective: to promote the acquisition of English language. The following section provides some clarity on these differences.

### **2.9 Some differences between conventional and web-based language teaching**

Mak (1995) says that there are four kinds of activities on the Web that are relevant for language learning: instructional, publishing, research and collaboration. Several distinctions may be made to ascertain how language learning on the Web can be different from conventional classroom learning within the framework of instruction,

publishing, research and collaboration. The following table, adapted from Mak (1995) is an indication of some of the differences:

*Figure 2.9: Differences between conventional and web-based language learning*

<b>Conventional language learning</b>	<b>Web-based language learning</b>
Linear presentation	Hypertext, multimedia
Not very motivating	High motivation
Receptive learning	Self-paced, self-accessed learning
High teacher control	High learner control
One-to-many (teacher to students)	Individual and many-to-many
Limited resources	Unlimited, updated information
Interaction with fellow classmates	Contact with classmates, native speakers and professionals

Adapted from Mak (1995)

In relation to publishing, the differences between conventional language learning and Web-based language learning include differences in how material is presented. As stated earlier in this chapter, traditional, print-based materials are generally presented in linear format, while on the WWW, information is presented in hypertext, which enables the learner to take multiple routes (please refer also to Derewianka, 1993). That is, learners may access glossaries for words they do not understand, or even listen to the pronunciation of a word they find difficult by highlighting particular aspects of the text that are hyperlinked. Learners may read up on the background of the author, or even look up other works by the author. In some instances, learners might ask the author or editor of a text questions, and receive feedback as well, completing the interactive nature of the process.

The multimedia possibilities of the Web include graphic, auditory, and visual texts, to a greater extent than non-web teaching and learning. Users are therefore exposed to a wider range of multimodal Web-based materials in contrast to traditional print-based materials. This promotes a more learner-centered or autonomous approach that appears to facilitate greater interaction among teachers and learners, as well as with

outside professionals if necessary (Mak, 1995; Derewianka, 1993; Kajee, 2002, 2003).

Learning can therefore be more self-paced than receptive.

Learners also have a collaborative audience to communicate with, including native speakers of English, as well as other ESL learners and professionals. They are able to interact in real situations and collaborative class projects may be done across continents. The learner is not limited to the teacher and fellow classmates as an audience. Students are far more motivated to write when they know that their work is being shared with others, and may even be published on the Web (Mak, 1995; Warschauer, 1996a).

Students are encouraged to draft, edit and rewrite before submitting a piece of work. According to Mak (1995:3), this encourages them “to transcend the physical and psychological boundary of the language classroom and enter into the real world, the international community”. However, the differences provided by Mak (1995) should also not be over-simplified. While the Net has the potential to provide high learner control, and increased opportunities for student interaction, it is not straight-forward, and much depends on pedagogy and how the technology is used.

New technologies and the Net are therefore changing the way we traditionally perceive education (Moote, 2002; Mak, 1995; Snyder, 2002). It is for these reasons that I wanted to find out more about teaching and learning in online environments. My project however, focuses on the instructional, research and collaborative aspects of

Mak's (1995) model<sup>70</sup>. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. Having examined the changes brought about by the use of Net technology, it is inevitable that there are implications for the role played by the teacher. The next section examines the shift in the teacher's role.

## **2.10 The changing role of the teacher**

Education policy documents indicate that teachers' responsibilities are changing. With the increasing utilization of ICT in the classroom, these changes are compounded. Berge (1995) says there are four areas in which the role of the teacher changes: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. Pedagogical conditions encompass teachers' duties as facilitators in the online classroom; social conditions include creating an environment suitable for suitable facilitation; managerial conditions include organizational and administrative tasks; and technical conditions encompass knowledge of the ICT system, hardware and software. It might not be possible for the teacher to fulfill all these roles simultaneously. The teacher needs to be technologically competent to manage the CALL classroom, and technical support may be necessary, which has implications for budgets in already financially-strained institutions.

The SAIDE Report (2000) on ICT-use in South Africa also indicates that with technological changes, it is implicit that the role of the teacher changes too. The traditional role of the teacher as central and dominant in the teaching-learning process has undergone a paradigm shift, not only as a result of the use of new media in the classroom, but because of general shifts in how learning is viewed. In the technology-

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<sup>70</sup> I did not take my students through to the task of publishing for a worldwide audience because their training did not extend to Web page design at the time. Because we used an internal Web management system, which required a class key and password, their work was published for the classroom audience.

enhanced classroom we rely more on information technology as the source of data and information, and less on the teacher as the source of information (Cunningham, 2000). The teacher's role, though it changes, is no less important. The role played by the teacher becomes one of facilitator of learning: guide, motivator, correspondent, challenger, materials' designer.

The collaborative role of the teacher is also foregrounded with the use of technology. The use of computer applications facilitates networking among teachers, who may form support and interest groups, especially if they are new to the field. Such groups are invaluable in providing assistance in identifying new material, methodology and when technical problems may be experienced (Cunningham, 2000). There are numerous such CALL support groups and listservs that currently exist for teachers who would like more support, and as Singhal (1997), Warschauer (1997), Brown (1999) and discussion documents such as the *Draft White Paper on e-Education* (2004) remind us, teachers would benefit greatly from training.

Because the teacher has become a facilitator of learning, rather than 'sage on the stage', he/she will find, select, and offer information in a variety of ways on the basis of what his/her students must learn in order to meet their diverse needs (Warschauer and Healy, 1998). As facilitators, teachers should be aware of the material available on the Net, as well as the Net-based strategies that may be harnessed in the classroom. Teachers should respond to students' current needs. Although training is an obvious necessity for teachers to be able to use ICT effectively in their teaching, the results of the SAIDE (2003) Report *Computers in Schools* bears testimony to the lack of formal teacher training opportunities in South Africa. The report indicates that only eleven certificated courses on training teachers to use ICT in their teaching currently exist in

South Africa, of forty-one tertiary institutions surveyed, including universities, technikons, and colleges. The reality for South Africa and other developing countries is therefore a far cry from the recommendations made by researchers in developing countries. Introducing ICTs into the classroom has implications for the budget, pre- and in-service teacher training, as well as for the learners. So, while researchers such as Kahmi-Stein (2000) recommend that technology be integrated across the curriculum of teacher-education programmes because of the benefits of CMC on teaching and learning, the reality is still quite distant in developing countries.

### **2.11 Reflections**

While the use of CALL and technology-enhanced learning environments appears to be promising, the constraints must also be considered because they can lead to limited success in attaining objectives, even failure. In order to overcome some of the constraints, the role of the teacher must be emphasised. Constraints include teachers' and, or students' lack of technical and theoretical competence, teachers' and, or students' lack of interest, cultural impediments, financial barriers such as the cost of hardware, software, maintenance, and lack of infrastructure (O'Dowd, 2001; O'Dowd, 2004; Jones, 2001; Lee, 2000). The need for training, as emphasised in Kern and Warschauer's (2000) suggestion for an electronic literacy approach, is therefore vital. Such an approach calls for a framework that integrates electronic literacy into the language learning classroom (O'Dowd, 2001).

Despite the limitations, the learning potential of technology cannot be overlooked. Technology has opened up a whole new world of teaching and learning opportunities, but we are reminded that computer networks must supplement, not replace teachers (Mak, 1995). Warschauer (2000b) adds:

The Internet does not constitute or prescribe a particular teaching method; rather, it is an important medium bringing together tens of millions of people throughout the world. The existence of the Internet provides the potential for purposeful, powerful use of online communication in language writing classes. It is up to us to give life to that purpose and thus achieve the full potential of computer networks in second language teaching (2000b:9).

Nor can we expect results simply by purchasing elaborate hardware and software. Computer technology should be used to supplement and enhance good teaching practice. As Schneiderman (1997,vii) says, “We must do more than teach our students to ‘surf the net,’ we must teach them to make waves”. However, in Singhal’s (1997) experience, although technology should not take over the language classroom, it should be embraced in order to allow educators to do those things they are unable to do themselves.

This chapter has examined the role played by technology locally and globally, by examining some key issues of online learning, and by drawing distinctions between face-to-face and online learning contexts. A brief history of CALL was presented and used to locate my study within communicative and network-based integrative CALL frameworks. Technological applications and activities for the English classroom were described, together with evidence from studies in the field. Finally, the introduction of technology into the classroom has implications for the teacher’s role, hence, the changing role of the teacher was examined.

In Chapter 3, I draw on concepts that are relevant to online interaction. I examine concepts such as the Information Age, sociocultural theory of learning, communities of practice, literacy as social practice, New Literacy Studies, identity, and autonomy to provide the theoretical framework for my study on negotiation, participation, the construction of identity and autonomy in online communities of practice.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Theorising learning, communities of practice, literacies, identity and autonomy**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter examined six key issues that I consider relevant to my study: the nature of online learning; the paradigm shift from face-to-face teaching and learning to teaching and learning in a virtual environment; the notion of ‘computer-mediated communication’ and its role in the teaching and learning of English; the concept ‘computer-assisted language learning’; and specific online applications and activities practices (such as e-mail, e-journals, the WWW, audio and video streaming, and web course managers) that are appropriate for the teaching and learning of English.

In Chapter 3 I present the theoretical framework of my study on online communities of practice. First I examine Castells’ (1996) views on the shift from the Industrial Age to the Information Age. I draw on constructivist principles of meaning-making, and establish links between Vygotsky’s (1978) Sociocultural Theory of Learning, Lave and Wenger’s (1991, 1996, 2002) Situated Learning, and Communities of Practice (COP), as well as Rogoff’s (2003) views on Communities of Practice. I further suggest, on the basis of the concept ‘literacy as social practice’, that participants’ home, community, and school electronic literacy practices, with emphasis on ICT, impact on their classroom electronic literacy practices. To this end I draw on the concept ‘literacy as social practice’ and New Literacy Studies, in particular, the views and theories of Gee (1996, 1997, 2000), Street (1984, 1993, 1998, 2003), Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic (2000) and Lankshear and Knobel (1997, 2004). I also argue that how learners construct their identities while making meaning is fundamental to participation in a COP. Thus I include discussion of Castells’ (1996), Norton (Pierce’s) (1995, 1997, 2000), and Hall’s (1992) work on identity, which positions

identity within a non-essentialist, post-structural framework. I extend their work on identity, to include the construction of identity in online environments. Finally, I employ Knowles' (1975, 1984) concept of andragogy, which I argue best describes the undergraduate students in my study as adult learners. Key to the concept andragogy is the idea of self-direction, or autonomy<sup>71</sup>, which links to Lave and Wenger's (1991) views that participants who are autonomous tend to participate more actively in COPs. I examine the concept autonomy by referring primarily to the work of Knowles (1975, 1980) and Guglielmino (1977, 1997).

### **3.2 Shifting from an Industrial Age to an Information Age**

Digitisation is characteristic of the move from an Industrial Age to an Information Age<sup>72</sup>. Thus the shift from the Industrial Age to the Information Age is largely marked, among other things, by technology becoming increasingly accessible to a larger audience. With the proliferation of the WWW, some people in developed contexts have unlimited access to information and unlimited opportunities for communication, giving rise to what Castells calls the "information technology revolution" (Castells, 1996: 5), which is "reshaping, at accelerated pace, the material basis of society" (Castells, 1996:1). However, while this may be an accurate observation in developed countries, it is not always accurate of developing countries such as South Africa, where access to technology is minimal, sometimes even non-existent for certain social and economic groups, especially those from disadvantaged communities.

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<sup>71</sup> The terms 'autonomy' and 'self-direction' are used interchangeably, depending on how they are used by different theorists. This is explained in the section on learner autonomy

<sup>72</sup> The Information Age is also referred to by theorists and researchers as the information society, knowledge economy, and new economy ([www.TwinIsles.dev](http://www.TwinIsles.dev)). In this thesis I use the term Information Age.

Because the Information Society is one that is able to use information effectively, a key feature of such a society is its information and communication networks. It is inevitable then, that the dependence on the new modes of information flow gives power to those in a position to control the flow of information (Castells, 1996). This view resonates with the position taken by Feenberg (1991) and Warschauer (2002a; 2002b; 2003a; 2003b; 2004b; 2005, in print), as introduced earlier in this thesis: that the digital divide should not be considered a bipolar division between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’. Rather, it is about political, economic, institutional, cultural, and linguistic issues of class and power. In my project on online communities of practice among participants with limited previous access to the use of ICT, issues of power are fundamental. I examine the extent to which such participants negotiate meaning, and argue that the configuration of communities cannot overlook the identities participants construct in online spaces, and how they position themselves in relation to technology. Another key concern is the extent to which learner autonomy is facilitated in an online environment, to promote flexible, lifelong learning, and to further prepare learners for the digital world. Thus, later in the thesis I elicit participants’ views by interviewing them on the extent to which they perceive themselves to be autonomous in the online context. While it is inevitable that the Information Age has implications for education and learning, these implications are not without challenges.

### **3.3 Some challenges for education and social inclusion**

Reigeluth argues that the Industrial Age was characterised by control, conformity and compliance (in Cronje, 1997). In the traditional classroom, the teacher played a central dominant role, and communication was limited. In the Information Age, on the other hand, the focus is on the process to teaching and learning that promotes

inclusive education, autonomy and co-operation, shared decision-making, initiative and networking among teachers and learners. The learner is greatly valued in this process, and the teacher-centered approach is *passé*.

In South Africa, inclusive teaching and learning is recommended in the *Green Paper on Higher Education* (1996) to narrow societal divides. Inclusion has social consequences, and of great concern to policy-makers and educationalists is the possibility that the use of ICT could further marginalize communities without access to technology. Chapman (1996) for example, says that society should exploit technology to provide education for democratic, socially inclusive, economically advanced communities.

Warschauer (2003b) points out that access to technology goes beyond quantifying those with and without access, and that a more significant factor is the use of technology for social transformation. In his book *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide* (2003b), he presents illustrative case studies of the implementation of ICT in under-resourced contexts: India's 'Hole in the Wall' Project, Egypt's Model Lab, and Ireland's Information Age Town. As noted in Chapter 2, all three cases demonstrate that introducing technology to under-resourced contexts does not automatically ensure a socially transformed society if participants are not sufficiently prepared for its use. Thus, he critiques the instrumentalist approach, and emphasises the need for a four-pronged approach to incorporate social, human, physical and digital resources.

Social inclusion refers to "the extent that individuals, families, and communities are able to fully participate in society and control their own destinies, taking into account

a variety of factors related to economic resources, employment, health, education, housing, recreation, culture, and civic engagement” (Warschauer, 2003b, online, page 5 of 7). He goes on to say that there are many ways in which the poor can be included, even though they may lack resources. Even those who are more privileged, may face exclusion on the basis of age, disability, sexual preference or gender<sup>73</sup>. Inclusion is therefore not merely about resources, but also about control over life circumstances. In an interview with Raven (2005, online, paragraph 6), Warschauer says “Technology for social inclusion deemphasizes the notion of bridging divides and instead looks at the broader goal - achieving social inclusion for all - and then considers the role that technology can play within that”.

In my project I implement an ICT intervention in my English class, not only with the purpose of introducing resources into a minimally resourced environment, thus narrowing the digital divide, but to examine how participants make meaning in such an environment. I investigate their ICT practices, participation and construction of identity as a means, not of what they do, but of who they are (Castells, 1996). One may question then, whether the use of technology contributes to social inclusion. Underpinning how participants position themselves and make meaning, I argue that it is necessary to examine the concept ‘learning’. In the sections that follow I discuss notions and principles of learning from a constructivist perspective, before going on to examine sociocultural approaches to learning and communities of practice.

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<sup>73</sup> Kajee (2005b) demonstrates social exclusion in relation to disability in her case study of a blind student using technology in an inclusive setting, that is, with sighted peers in an English class.

### 3.4 The notion ‘learning’

Numerous theories have been posited to explain how people learn, or how they move from one state of knowing to the next. Some of these theories have been accepted more readily than others, therefore a brief overview of the theories might help to provide insight into how learning occurs, and why certain practices are promoted over others. Martin (2000) summarised some of the main theorists, as well as their foci, as follows:

Figure 3.4: Summary of learning theories

Theories	Theorists	Learning process	Locus of learning	Examples of practice
Behaviourist	Thorndike, Pavlov, Watson, Guthrie, Hull, Tolman	Change in behaviour	Stimuli in the external environment	Behavioural objectives, competency-based education, skills development, training
Cognitivist	Koffka, Kohler, Lewin, Piaget, Ausubel, Bruner, Gagne, Vygotsky	Internal mental processes	Internal cognitive structuring	Cognitive development, metacognition, learning how to learn
Constructivist	Van Glaserfield, Ernest, Candy	Constructing understanding of the world.	Search for meaning, understanding the whole and parts.	Generation of new mental models to fit in with the old. Constructing own meaning.
Humanist	Maslow, Rogers	Personal act to fulfil potential	Affective and cognitive needs	Self-directed learning
Social learning	Bandura, Freire, Rotter	Interaction and observation in the social context	Interaction of person, behaviour, environment	Mentoring, co-operative/ collaborative learning.
Adult learning	Knowles, Jarvis, Kidd, McClusky, Mezirow	Self-directed learning through life experiences	Change in life circumstances	Andragogy, self-directed learning, simulation, work-based learning
Student development	Chikering, Gilligan, Magolda, Perry	Development of the whole person	Collegiate environment	Identity, development, moral development

Adapted from Martin (2000:2)

Figure 3.4 is not meant to suggest that the theories are mutually exclusive. The theories apply to face-to-face learning, however, I draw on them in my study of online

learning because the key concepts of learning that are underpinned remain the same. I have located my study within the broader framework of constructivist principles of meaning-making, and draw on key sociocultural principles provided by Vygotsky (1962, 1978). Later in the chapter I move on to self-directed principles in adult learning.

### **3.5 Constructing an understanding of the world**

Constructivism, as a philosophy of learning, is based on the premise that we construct our own understanding of the world we live in by reflecting on our experiences. We generate our own rules and mental models in order to make sense of our experiences. Learning is therefore a process whereby we adjust our mental models to accommodate new experiences. Tobin's (1990:30) view of constructivism as "a theory that assumes knowledge cannot exist outside the bodies of cognising beings...Knowledge is a construction of reality" is therefore fitting. The view highlights the notion that new experiences are interpreted and made sense of in terms of previous experiences. Candy (1991) adds that because individuals give meaning to events and ideas, knowledge cannot be taught, but is learnt or constructed and built up by the learner.

Constructivism essentially takes two broad forms: cognitive constructivism and social constructivism. Cognitive constructivism<sup>74</sup> focuses on a learner's internal cognitive processes and cognitive structure during learning, while social constructivism expounds the role of human mediation and the social context in shaping learning (Appleton, 1996). Both views are important in how we learn, however, for the

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<sup>74</sup> Cognitive constructivism, based on Piaget's (1977) work, encompasses two main areas, the first on being the 'ages and stages' component that predicts what children can or cannot understand at particular ages. Second is Piaget's (1977) theory of development that describes how children develop cognitive abilities.

purpose of my study, I draw more strongly on social constructivism because of my focus on participation, literacy as social practice, identity and learner autonomy.

In essence, the guiding principles of constructivism, as provided by theorists such as von Glasersfeld (1990), Derry (1992) and Colburn (2000) are:

- Learning is a search for meaning, therefore learning must start with issues around which students are trying to construct meaning;
- Meaning involves understanding wholes as well as parts, and it is necessary that parts must be understood within the context of the whole. The learning process should therefore focus on concepts, rather than isolated facts;
- The mental models that students bring with them in order to understand the world must be understood in order to teach well;
- The purpose of learning is for an individual to construct his or her own meaning, not just to memorise the right answers. It is therefore important that assessment is part of the learning process, not an isolated entity, ensuring that students are provided with feedback on the quality of their learning in an ongoing manner.

While it is possible to create meaningful constructivist learning environments in face-to-face situations, I investigate these possibilities in blended spaces, and ask how participants with limited knowledge of online participation, construct meaning in these unfamiliar spaces. Their online participation has implications for education, and teaching and learning in relation to curriculum, teaching strategies and practices, the learning environment, the role of the teacher and learner, and materials-design.

The traditional view of learning has a tendency to locate objectivist/ behaviourist views and constructivist/ cognitivist views at different ends of a continuum. Cronje (2000) argues that this view is problematic because it limits any learning experience as either objectivist or constructivist. His argument is that the view caters for learning that may be low, for example on stimulus-response methodology, and high on scaffolded constructivism, but it does not cater for learning experiences that may be high on both. This is also evident in South African educational policies, which view the 'old' and 'new' systems as appears in Figure 3.5 overleaf:

Figure 3.5: South African government's changing view of education

Old view	New view
Passive learners.	Active learners.
Examination-driven.	On-going assessment.
Rote learning.	Critical thinking, reasoning, reflection and action.
Content-based syllabus broken down into subjects.	Integration of knowledge. Learning is relevant and connected to real-life situations.
Syllabus is viewed as rigid and non-negotiable.	Learning programmes are seen as guides that allow teachers to be innovative and creative in designing programmes.
Emphasis is on what the teacher hopes to achieve.	Emphasis is on outcomes – what learners become and understand.
Behavioural approach to learning and assessment.	Cognitive approach to learning and assessment.
Assessment of isolated knowledge and discrete skills.	Knowledge, abilities, thinking processes, metacognition and affect assessed.
Individual learning and products.	Collaborative learning and products.

Adapted from Cronje (2000)

With the introduction of constructivist environments, our assumptions about learning also change. Grabinger (1996: 667 in Reeves 1998) presents the major changes in our shift in assumptions about learning, which articulate with Cronje's (2000) views on old and new perspectives on education: old assumptions include the fact that people are able to transfer learning with ease by learning decontextualised concepts; learners are recipients of knowledge; learning is essentially behaviouristic; learners are passive recipients; skills are best acquired independent of context; and assessment is decontextualised. New assumptions challenge these notions: people need both context and content, as it is difficult to transfer learning; learners are active constructors of knowledge; learning is cognitive and in a constant state of growth; learners bring their own experiences to the learning context; knowledge and skills are best acquired within realistic contexts; and assessment is best realistic and holistic.

Because of the changes in the assumptions about learning, new challenges arise for designers of constructivist learning environments, which Wilson defines as follows:

a place where learners may work together and support each other as they use a variety of tools and information resources in their guided pursuit of learning goals and problem-solving activities (1996:5 in Reeves 1998, online).

Reeves (1998) says that developers of constructivist learning environments adhere to the following goals in order to meet the challenges of learning:

- provide students with experience in the knowledge construction process;
- provide experience in and appreciation for multiple perspectives;
- embed learning in realistic and relevant contexts;
- encourage ownership and voice in the learning process;
- encourage the use of multiple modes of representation;
- encourage self-awareness of the knowledge construction process.

These I attempt to simulate in my online environment. Constructivism also has an impact on the curriculum and instruction by promoting curricula that are customised to students' prior knowledge. I discuss this further in Chapter 5 where I present the Foundation in English courses which provide the content basis of my study. Also, in relation to pedagogy, teachers using the constructivist paradigm would shape their teaching strategies to student responses and encourage students to analyse, interpret and predict information. Within this paradigm teachers also rely more on open-ended questions and promote extensive dialogue among students.

From the above it is evident that the learning environment, and teaching strategies in constructivist approaches promote interaction to make meaning. Yager and Lutz (1994) therefore draw attention to 'how' to teach, rather than 'what' to teach in the constructivist paradigm, and emphasise the need to redesign the typical classroom, as teaching strategies must be congruent with learning processes. They say that to improve student learning it is necessary to focus on a change in teaching. Their perspective is that constructivist teachers encourage and accept student autonomy, initiation and leadership, and encourage students to interact with one another and with teachers. These key principles are also conflated with the guiding principles of self-direction, as well as Knowles' (1975, 1980) theory supporting adult learning. The principles are examined in more detail in the sections on self-direction. Pereira (1996)

shares the view that learners must be responsible for their own learning and adds that there is need for a supportive community within which students may interact and negotiate meaning without fear of making mistakes.

In summary, the paradigm shift from an Industrial Age to an Information Age has presented the South African educational system with new concerns around how teachers can best implement technology in under-resourced environments, while still focusing on learning. Thus, I focused on a perspective of learning from a constructivist stance, which places learners as constructing their own understanding of the world. The view resonates with Government's changing view of education, which places learners, rather than teachers at the center of the learning process. This notion I argue as central to my position on learning.

### **3.6 Key principles of learning**

Bickmore-Brand (1996) identified seven principles of learning that underpin constructivist theory: context, interest, scaffolding, metacognition, responsibility, community, and modelling. Her principles also overlap with Knowles' (1975, 1980) principles of adult learning, or andragogy to a great extent. The principles of context, interest, scaffolding begin with the learners' knowledge base. They emphasise starting where the learner is at, and using their background knowledge to establish a context, which they perceive as relevant. The principles relate to central issues in constructivist theory, where knowledge, which is stored as schemata or frameworks, and new knowledge is assimilated or accommodated into these frameworks (Pereira, 1996). It also emphasises the need for knowledge to be contextual and relevant to the learner.

The principle of metacognition relates to the ability of students to think about how they learn (Pereira, 1996). If learners are able to contextualise learning, they are able to control it, thus constructivists acknowledge that students must learn how to learn. The next key principle provided by Bickmore-Brand (1996) is when learners develop the ability to accept responsibility for their learning (Pereira, 1996; Downes, 2000). Learners must take responsibility for their own learning, which is also a core belief in self-directed learning, as is explained later in this chapter.

In relation to community, Pereira (1996:29) says, “The development of a supportive community of learners provides an environment in which experiences can be examined and ideas constructively tested.” Learners should not feel that they are isolated entities, they should feel that they are part of a supportive community they can share and interact with. They should have the freedom to express and debate ideas in an environment that is free from ridicule. The principle resonates with Lave and Wenger’s (1991, 1996, 2002) and Rogoff’s (2003) community of practice theory. The idea of experimenting with new knowledge and negotiating meaning is central to constructivist thinking. The final principle, modelling, is designed around the view that learners should be able to work co-operatively where they are able to observe and learn from others, which is pivotal in a community of practice.

In my study I have selected to examine more closely the learning principles of community, responsibility, and modeling, acknowledging these as gaps in current educational practice. I look at community more broadly within a sociocultural framework, modeling as Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept ‘apprenticeship’, and taking responsibility as one of the key principles of self-direction. Constructivist theory articulates well with Vygotsky’s (1978) Sociocultural theory, Situated Learning

theory, and Lave and Wenger's (1991, 1996, 2002) and Rogoff's (2003) *Communities of Practice*, as the following sections elaborate.

### **3.7 Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory of Learning**

Vygotsky's theoretical contributions to the development of education are widely known among educational theorists. In the 1930s Vygotsky argued that social experiences shape our ways of thinking and interpreting the world. He regarded learning and education not only as central to cognitive development, but as "the quintessential sociocultural activity" (Moll, 1990:1). The capacity to teach and learn is therefore fundamental to human beings. Central to Vygotsky's theory is the belief that biological and cultural development, do not occur in isolation (Vygotsky, 1978). Where Piaget (1977) believed that cognitive growth occurred in stages, with a fixed endpoint, Vygotsky believed that development is not a product, but a process. Thus, his approach may be characterised according to three themes:

- a reliance on genetic (developmental) analysis
- the claim that higher mental functions in the individual have their origins in social life
- the claim that an essential key to understanding human social and psychological processes is the tools and signs used to mediate them (Wertsch, 1990:112).

Vygotsky's view was that the route to understanding the mind lay in specifying its origins. In this regard he was influenced by Piaget (1977), among other psychologists. His second point is that mental functioning in the individual is found in social activity.

He said:

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals (Vygotsky, 1978: 57).

According to Vygotsky (1978), individual cognition occurred in a social situation, thus shifting emphasis away from the individual to the group, the group therefore

being vital to the learning process for all participants. One may learn *via* interaction with other individuals and more knowledgeable peers in social situations to negotiate meaning (refer also to Jaramillo, 1996). Subjects therefore develop their own interpretative meaning of acts while communicating with others.

The third point is that higher mental functioning is mediated by tools and signs. Vygotsky (1978) argues that human activity can only be understood if we take into account the tools or signs that mediate this activity. For instance, Wertsch says “These forms of mediation, which are the products of the sociocultural milieu in which they exist, are not viewed as simply facilitating activity that would otherwise take place. Instead, they are viewed as fundamentally shaping and defining it” (1990:113). Vygotsky’s focus on mediation was the human communication system, namely, speech. His concern was with how language, and speech, in particular, were interrelated with aspects of social and individual activity. As Tudge (1990:156) says “language, (is) a tool of immense power, (and) ensures that linguistically created meaning are shared meanings, social meanings”.

All three points are central to my work in the sense that I focus on students who novices with technology, and I examine how they develop during their use of technological tools. Second, I acknowledge that learning does not occur in isolation, but through interaction with others, and third, I acknowledge that students mediate knowledge through their use of language, and in this study, technology, both of which serve as mediating tools and signs.

Another key concept established by Vygotsky is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The underlying assumption behind the concept is that psychological

development and instruction are socially embedded, and in order to understand them one must analyse the surrounding society and its social relations (Hedegaard, 1990).

Vygotsky (1978) explained the ZPD thus:

The child is able to copy a series of actions which surpass his or her own capacities, but only within limits. By means of copying, the child is able to perform much better when together with and guided by adults than when left alone, and can do so with understanding and independently. The difference between the level of solved tasks that can be performed with adult guidance and help and the level of independently solved tasks is the zone of proximal development (in Hedegaard, 1990:349).

Thus, the ZPD bridges the gap between what is known and what can be known (Riddle, 1999). In addition, the ZPD also provides the process through which children, with assistance, come to be socialised into the dominant culture (Tudge, 1990). It is through collaboration with another person, either an adult or a more competent peer in the ZPD, that leads to culturally appropriate development. The notion articulates well with Lave and Wenger's (1991) view of apprenticeship as assisted performance, and Rogoff's (2003) views on guided participation, as is discussed later in this chapter.

As shown in previous sections<sup>75</sup>, schools<sup>76</sup> historically have not constructed environments where students play an active role in their own, as well as the education of their peers (Riddle, 1990; Schutz, 2002). Vygotsky's (1978) theory requires teacher-learner and learner-learner collaboration to make meaning. Riddle (1999) says that this leads to reciprocal learning and makes the classroom a community of learning. Schutz (2002:4) adds "when it comes to language learning, the authenticity of the environment and the affinity between its participants are essential elements to

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<sup>75</sup> For example, the work of Reeves (1998) and Cronje (2000).

<sup>76</sup> Note that I move between research conducted in schools and in the higher education context because my students are in their first year of study and just out of school (for the most part). Furthermore, studies located in the higher education context are minimal, and I believe that school-based research has an impact on my study to some extent. In addition, the issues and challenges remain the same, even though the context might differ.

make the learner feel part of this environment. These elements are rarely predominant in conventional classrooms”. This too, is underscored by Lave and Wenger’s (1991) view of assistance and legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice.

Scaffolding and reciprocal teaching are effective strategies in the ZPD. Scaffolding allows for the teacher to provide students with the opportunities to extend their current skills and knowledge, and requires that tasks be simplified so that they are manageable and motivate students to pursue instructional goals. Studies cited by Riddle (1999)<sup>77</sup> demonstrate that reciprocal teaching shows advantages over other instructional strategies. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) Situated Learning Theory concurs with Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory in terms of conceptual framework, and has implications for online environments.

### **3.8 Situated learning and communities of practice**

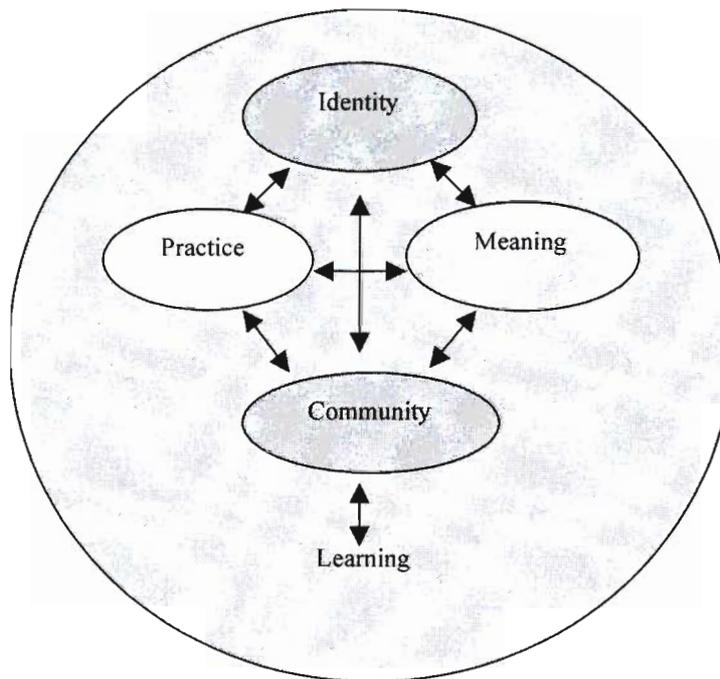
Lave and Wenger (1991) say that learning may be equated to co-participation. Wenger (1998) asserts that situated learning theories see learning as interactive relationships between people and their environments. Their theory advocates learning in a specific context, and focuses on how individuals become members of communities of practice (COP). They see COPs as sets of relations among people, activities and the world, over time, and in relation to other overlapping COPs (Lave and Wenger, 1991, 1996). Rogoff (2003) also asserts “*Humans develop through their changing participation in the socio-cultural activities of their communities, which also change*” (Rogoff, 2003:11) (italics in original). She suggests that children, for instance, learn the skills and practices of their community by engaging with others

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<sup>77</sup> Studies cited by Riddle (1999) such as Brown and Palincsar (1989), Driscoll (1994), and Hausfather (1996).

who may contribute to structuring the process to be learned. Adults may provide guidance and help adjust participation according to proficiency. COPs therefore emphasise the interconnectedness of people, learning, practice, participation and the social world. The figure that follows, adapted from Barab (2000), illustrates the relations among practice, meaning, identity and community:

*Figure 3.8: Relations between practice, meaning, identity and community*



Adapted from Barab (2000)

In her original diagram, Barab (2000) represents the different entities (meaning, identity, practice, and community) separately. What I found useful was the identification of the different entities. However, I also found the diagram limiting in that she does not illustrate the interaction or relationship between the entities. Thus I have adapted her diagram to include arrows to illustrate the symbiotic relationships, which derive from assistance and guided participation within a community.

Rogoff (2003) argues that development occurs as a process where a person gradually increases his/her participation and belonging to society's various communities of practice. These communities may include the social, school, family and career groups with which the student chooses to identify. Communities share their social practices, which include the language, tools, documents, images, symbols, criteria, procedures and regulations. Knowledge is integrated in the doing, social relations and expertise of the communities.

People construct their identities in relation to the communities in which they participate, and move along a continuum of learning, from legitimate peripheral participation, to full participation. Legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) refers to the "relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities and artefacts, and communities of knowledge and practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29). Wenger (1998) uses the terms 'marginal' and 'peripheral' participation, where the latter leads to full participation<sup>78</sup>. Lave and Wenger's (1991) use of the terms 'newcomers' and 'old-timers' refer to novices and experts, or more able participants, respectively. Lave and Wenger (1991, 1996) describe the relationship between novices and experts as an apprenticeship. In their view, learners are the 'apprentices', and teachers are the 'masters' (1991: 29)<sup>79</sup>. I prefer the view, as discussed earlier that teachers are facilitators of the learning process, because I think that 'masters' implies superiority, with the learners or 'apprentices' as followers, rather than co-constructors of knowledge. Lave and Wenger (1991) also perceive situated learning to be more than 'learning by doing', but as an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice.

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<sup>78</sup> Refer, for example to the Carr *et al* (2004) study of participation using a COP framework in an Economics course at the University of Cape Town.

<sup>79</sup> The term 'apprenticeship' arose from Lave and Wenger's (1991) observations of Vai and Gola tailors in Liberia, Yucatek midwives in Mexico, US navy quartermasters and butchers, and members of Alcoholics Anonymous.

They continue that situatedness “implied emphasis on comprehensive understanding involving the whole person rather than ‘receiving’ a body of factual knowledge about the world; on activity in and with the world; and on the view that agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other” (Lave and Wenger, 1991:33). Thus, they propose that LPP is “a descriptor of engagement in social practice that entails learning as an integral constituent” (Lave and Wenger, 1991:35).

Peripherality suggests that there are varied ways of being located in fields of participation. Lave and Wenger (1991) view the move from peripheral participation to more intensive participation as an empowering position, as is the prevention from participation a disempowering one. They also emphasise that LPP is not in itself an educational form or pedagogical strategy. LPP takes place whatever the context. Learning therefore implies involvement in new activities, the ability to perform new tasks, and the ability to master new understandings. These, according to Lave and Wenger (1991), do not occur in isolation, they are part of a broader system of relations, which arise from social communities.

In order to participate in, and become a member of a community, newcomers need access to the community, which resonates well with Warschauer’s (2003a; 2003b) views on social inclusion. Access includes access to activities, old-timers, other members, information, resources, language, and opportunities for participation. Engaging with the technologies and tools of the practice is therefore vital. Thus, in an ICT environment, for example, access to ICT and knowledge of its use are essential.

Changes in the community and in identity are intrinsic to the process of participation. Language is therefore central to the development of the community, with peripheral

participants learning to ‘talk’ in the same manner as full participants<sup>80</sup>. Situated Learning theory shares key concepts with Vygotsky’s (1978) Sociocultural theory. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept, like Vygotsky’s, is based on learning as a social phenomenon. In essence, Situated Learning theory states that the goal of education is the negotiation of meaning, and they emphasise that education therefore cannot be examined in isolation. The interconnectedness of persons learning and participating and the social world is therefore central.

The learning theories discussed thus far have not taken cognisance of the introduction of ICT in society, which has the ability to provide infinite opportunities for social interaction. In his book, *The Virtual Community*, Rheingold (1993) explains that it is inevitable that people will build virtual communities, with the availability of CMC.

He says:

Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (Rheingold, 1993: 6).

While I agree with Rheingold’s (1993) view about the building of virtual communities, I do not view this as an inevitable conclusion. In developing countries, considering the scarcity of technological applications, I believe that learners will have to be helped to create and participate in these communities.

In the technology-supported learning environment, theoretical support for the collaborative and social aspects of computer usage is essential if pedagogical

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<sup>80</sup> Aldrich (2001) says that it is this knowledge of the language and the stories of the community that enables participants to become members of the community. Hildreth, Kimble and Wright (2000) add that the stories and narrations that are used in a community results in the transition from novice to expert. As newcomers’ stories become accepted into the community, they become legitimate members of the community.

approaches are to be developed. I found that a communicative framework based on Vygotskian (1978) Sociocultural theory and Lave and Wenger's (1991) Situated Learning theory is most relevant for understanding how learners work towards achieving higher order learning outcomes using ICT because, as McLoughlin and Oliver (1998) argue, computers are now recognised as part of the social context of classrooms. This would be true for developed countries, rather than developing countries. Riddle (1999) adds that while collaboration and peer instruction was once only possible in shared physical space, learning relationships can now be formed in cyberspace, with ICT as a cultural tool that students use to mediate and internalise their learning.

Warschauer (1997b) states that the special features of online communication provide an impressive array of new ways to link learners: "When viewed in the context of sociocultural learning theory, which emphasises the educational value of creating cross-cultural communities of practice and critical inquiry, (these) features appear to make online learning a potentially powerful tool for collaborative learning" (Warschauer, 1997b: online, 15 of 22). He counters Rheingold's (1991) argument presented earlier, and cautions that not all educators feel equally strongly about online communication, and that online activities can be used in the traditional transmission style, which may lead to ICT not having the transformative effect as expected. The connection between communities of practice and technology in online learning environments, is further explained by Duncan and Leander (2001). In order to create a community, they too emphasise the need for participant interaction. Communities may develop in class discussions between facilitators and learners, and among the learners themselves. These are enhanced by the adoption of Net-based strategies such

as discussion threads, bulletin boards, listservs, chat facilities, and engaging students in e-mail projects.

While the latter online practices have been adopted by some teachers willingly, not all practitioners are enthusiastic about the possibilities of creating online communities of practice. Some, such as McMahon (in Alexiades, Gipson and Morey-Nase, 2001) found the authenticity of using the WWW questionable because of the breadth of the information available, and because its use can result in feelings of isolation. Jonassen (in Alexiades *et al*, 2001) further suggests that the use of technology reduces the opportunity for active interaction with other learners, especially when the communication is personally or culturally unfamiliar. However, several research studies, as discussed in the previous chapter, praise the benefits of online interaction.

Although online communities of practice are obviously collaborative because of the electronic networks involved, and users are able to maintain contact with individuals at other locations, those individuals may in turn belong to other COPs. This could expand worldwide, with anybody who has an interest being a member. This is the antithesis of Lave and Wenger's (1991) original view of COPs. Brown and Duguid (2000) therefore expanded the notion COP to 'network of practice' to describe more diffuse networks. In relation to language teaching, the term network-based language teaching (NBLT)<sup>81</sup>, as discussed earlier, is appropriate. In my study, only the e-pal section of the course involved global collaboration. This is explained in more detail in Chapter 4.

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<sup>81</sup> Please refer, for example, to O'Dowd's (2004) PhD study of NBLT and the development of intercultural communicative competence.

To illustrate the workings of an online COP, in a study conducted by Alexiades *et al* (2001), a group of students from an Australian school, in collaboration with students from the James Cook University were located on a remote island to work on an ecological project. They had to maintain contact with the school using laptops. The students were in an authentic ecological island environment and were mentored by the university students, perpetuating the notion of cognitive apprenticeship (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The mentors engaged in modelling, coaching and scaffolding, and provided students with reminders, feedback and support. The apprenticeship began with students observing from the boundary, and gradually moving to the centre of the community as functional agents.

In the local context, a study on student reflection and meta-reflection conducted by Granville and Dison (2005) illustrates how students at a South African university engaged in an English Academic Literacy course designed around face-to-face community of practice principles<sup>82</sup>.

Thus far I have presented theories around COPs. It is not inevitable that COP principles translate well into online practice. The implications for practice need further refinement. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory of Learning, as well as Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Rogoff's (2003) Situated Learning and Communities of Practice theories support the basic tenets of online learning in the following respects:

- The move away from the individual to the role of the individual within a learning community;

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<sup>82</sup> Granville and Dison's (2005) study was also conducted with students studying the Foundation in English Course that I examined in my study, albeit in a different year. The course, as I explain further in the research design of the thesis in Chapter 4, is based on discipline-specific contexts, where academic skills and practices are integrated with content. Students are provided with materials around specific themes, and skills are carefully scaffolded and modelled. Students reflect on their experiences throughout the course.

- The need for interaction among participants;
- The theories state that learners acquire knowledge when they are more autonomous, rather than when the teacher plays a central, dominant role, a situation supported by the role of the online facilitator;
- Learners process knowledge when it is presented at a level higher than they are used to, and that such tension results in learners moving from the periphery of a learning community to central participation.

Learning is not limited to knowing. My study lies at the interface between learning as meaning-making, language, and the use of new technologies. I argue that there is a symbiotic relationship between language and literacy, hence an examination of key concepts surrounding literacy adds value to my work. In the section to follow, I examine literature surrounding the concept ‘New Literacy Studies’, where literacy is conceptualized as a social practice.

### **3.9 New Literacy Studies: Providing a lens for literacy as social practice**

Literacy has long been a central concern of educationalists, as a means of socialisation, and as an end in itself (Goodfellow, 2004). Goodfellow (2004:379) adds that literacy has become a “lens” through which to look at educational practice more critically. Thus, in this study I examine the notion of literacy more closely, because of its relationship with language. Barton and Hamilton (2000:8) provide the following six propositions as a framework for the nature of literacy:

- Literacy is a social practice;
- Different literacies are associated with different domains of life;
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others;
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and practices;
- Literacy is historically situated;
- Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through informal and formal learning and sense making.

Gee (1996) suggests that in New Literacy Studies (NLS) literacy is not a skill, but a contextualised practice, thus NLS treat language and literacy as social practices rather than technical skills to be learnt in formal education. The concept requires that language and literacy be studied as they occur naturally in social life, taking into

account context and their different meanings to different cultural groups. Gee (1996) argues:

(T)he traditional view of literacy as the ability to read and write rips out of its sociocultural contexts and treats it as an asocial cognitive skill with little or nothing to do with human relationships. It cloaks literacy's connections to power, to social identity, and to ideologies, often in service of privileging certain types of literacies and certain types of people (1996:46).

He adds that reading and writing only make sense when studied in the context of social and cultural (and historical, political and economic) practices of which they are part (Gee, 2000)<sup>83</sup>.

Street (1984) too opposes the autonomous model of reading and writing as literacy in favour of an ideological model, which attempts to understand literacy in terms of social practice. Thus, there are many literacies that occur within varying social contexts. Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic (2000:1) agree "Literacy is situated. All uses of written language can be seen as located in particular times and places. Equally, all literate activity is indicative of broader social practices". In adopting a framework of literacy as social practice, literacies are positioned in relation to the social institutions and power relations that sustain them, education being one such institution (Street, 1995; Gee, 1996). Thus the teaching of one type of literacy could privilege certain groups, while disempowering others who have not had access to that dominant literacy. On the other hand, not exposing learners to that dominant literacy serves to exclude them from society at large. Barton and Hamilton (2000) agree that there are different literacies associated with different domains in life, and as Gee (1996) adds, home is the primary domain, and school, secondary, thus what learners bring from the home is valuable, though often marginalised in the school environment.

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<sup>83</sup> This is based on the idea that reading and writing are situated within specific Discourses, with a capital 'D' (Gee, 1996). Gee (1996) uses the term 'Discourses', rather than 'discourses', which refers to stretches of language. A Discourse, he says is a way of being together in the world (for example, gangs, classrooms, gay, and so on), and learners may belong to several Discourses simultaneously.

Barton and Hamilton (2000) distinguish further between the concepts 'literacy practices' and 'literacy events'. Literacy practices are the ways of utilizing language that people draw on in their lives. Practices are what people do with literacy, and are shaped by social rules that regulate the use and distribution of texts, prescribing who may have access to them. Thus literacy practices overlap with Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Rogoff's (2003) notions of communities of practice. Practice provides a link between reading, writing, and the social structures in which they are embedded, and which they help shape. Literacy events are activities where literacy has a role. They are observable episodes that arise from practices and are shaped and situated within a social context. In my study of an online classroom, I analyse messages posted to discussion threads as literacy events<sup>84</sup> situated within the broader literacy practice of the use of ICT in the higher education English classroom.

New Literacies are associated with the changes that are intrinsic to life. Different levels of change and practices have emerged with the introduction of digital and electronic media. Lankshear and Knobel (1997) refer to the use of digital and electronic media as technological literacies. Reading and writing, for instance require new practices, such as using hyperlinks, the use of semiotics in e-mails and chat rooms, being able to read different elements of Web pages, such as icons, menus, and understanding when to launch different media, such as to download music and video files or copy images. NLS embrace these changes, and highlight the importance of what learners bring to the classroom from outside of it<sup>85</sup>. The introduction of digital

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<sup>84</sup> Please refer also to de Pourbaix's (2000) study of how university students communicate in virtual spaces, in which she uses social practice as her theoretical framework.

<sup>85</sup> Please refer, for example, to Knobel and Lankshear's (1997) mapping of in-and out-of-school technology practices of a group of Australian students.

and electronic media such as computers, the Net, and cell phones has therefore changed what it means to learn, know and do things (Knobel and Lankshear, 2002). Much of the cyber lives of young people is text-based, such as e-mail, sms, chat, and discussion boards, although in the developing context of South Africa, this is more true of sms-text than e-mail, chat and discussions boards if one were to consider learners from under-resourced backgrounds. Goodfellow (2004) therefore recommends the exploration of the nature of textual interactions. If these are not explored, he cautions that it could lead to feelings of marginalisation and frustration among learners. His work on the linguistic analysis of discussion thread postings of distance education students as small-scale literacy events bears reference (Goodfellow, 2004). In my study, I examine the electronic literacy practices that participants have been exposed to, at home and in their high schools. I examine these practices in relation to ICT and the electronic literacy practices they are exposed to at university.

Literacies, like other uses of language, entail social identities. Gee (1996) says there is a reciprocal relationship between language and identity. He adds that literacy- and identity-association can occur in the classroom through active apprenticeships in academic social practices, and emphasises the importance of apprenticeship in acquiring new social identities and literacies, as do Lave and Wenger (1991) and Rogoff (2003).

Thus far, I have shown how my study will be underpinned by learning and sociocultural theory. I have shown, by reviewing key concepts surrounding New Literacy Studies and New Literacies, that the teaching of one type of literacy cannot

be justified, as there are multiple literacies which are embedded in cultural practices, and which vary with time and place.

Following Gee's (1996) 'take' on the reciprocity between language and identity, I argue that it is not just participants' electronic literacy practices that need to be examined, but how they construct themselves in relation to the above-mentioned changes that are fundamental. Thus, I shift perspective to examine notions of the construction of identities in communities of practice.

### **3.10 Constructing identities**

Hall (1992) argues that old identities, which stabilised the social world, are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject. As Castells (1996) explains:

In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning. This is not a new trend, since identity, and particularly religious and ethnic identity have been at the roots of meaning since the dawn of human society. Yet identity is becoming main, and sometimes the only, source of meaning in a historical period characterised by widespread destructuring of organizations, delegitimation of institutions, fading away of major social movements, and ephemeral cultural expressions. People increasingly organize their meaning not around what they do but on the basis of what they are (Castells, 1996:3).

This crisis of identity (Hall, 1992) is seen as part of a wider process of change, which is dislocating the central structures and processes of modern societies, and undermining the frameworks that gave individuals stable anchorage in the world<sup>86</sup>.

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<sup>86</sup> To illustrate the shift in the construction of identity, Hall (1992: 275-277) identifies three concepts of identity: enlightenment subject, sociological subject, and post-modern subject. The enlightenment subject is based on the concept of the human as a unified, centered individual, which emerged at birth and continued throughout the individual's existence. The sociological subject saw the subject as significant only in relation to others who mediated to the subject values, meanings and symbols. Here identity is formed in the interaction between self and society, and bridges the gap between the inside and outside. The subject was thus not composed of a single, but several identities. The post-modern subject is conceptualised as having no fixed, permanent identity. Identity becomes a "moveable feast" (Hall, 1992: 277). Thus, Hall says, the subject is decentred, dislocated. This is characteristic of late modernity, and with modern societies in constant change, it illustrates a theme of discontinuities (Hall,

Thus, as indicated by Castells (1996) above, people increasingly make meaning, not on the basis of what they do, but on they basis of what they are, or believe they are. In *The Power of Identity*, the second of his trilogy *The Information Age*, Castells says: “Identity is people’s source of meaning and experience” (Castells, 2004:6). In earlier work he cites Calhoun (1994) as follows:

We know of no people without names, no languages or cultures in which some manner of distinctions between self and other, we and they, are not made...Self-knowledge – always a construction no matter how much it feels like a discovery – is never altogether separable from claims to be known in specific ways by others (Calhoun, 1994)<sup>87</sup>.

Castells (2004) suggests that, from a sociological perspective, all identities are constructed, and that the social construction of identity takes place in a context marked by power relationships. The question is how are these identities constructed, and how does this position participants in an online environment? I explore these questions in the chapters in which my findings are presented.

In relation to writing in a second language, Matsuda, Canagarajah, Harklau, Hyland and Warschauer (2003) show that learning to write in a second language is not just the accumulation of technical linguistic abilities, but is related to identity, that is, how one sees oneself and is seen by others, as a student, as a writer, and as an ethnolinguistic minority. Thus, writing is interwoven with multiple, unstable, ambivalent identities as young adults, as immigrants, and often as people of colour<sup>88</sup>.

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1992: 277). In my study I examine how participants position themselves in their discussion of course readings, in relation to the identities they construct, from a non-essentialist, post-modern perspective.

<sup>87</sup> Cited by Castells (2004:6).

<sup>88</sup> Lam’s (2000) study of Almon, a teenage Chinese immigrant who writes to a transnational group of teenagers on the Net, is an example. The study shows how his correspondence relates to his developing identity in the use of English. In their study of adult immigrants’ writing, Doyle and Song (2005) say further that many people appear to be afraid of writing because it is in writing, much more than in speaking, that people have to express their identity. Their study illustrates how the adult students of English as a Foreign Language construct their identities through their writing.

In relation to participants' constructions of identity in their postings on discussion threads, I refer to the work of Bonny Norton (Pierce) (1995, 1997, 2000) and Ivanic (1998). In her work on language and identity of immigrant women, Norton (Pierce) (1995, 1997, 2000) uses 'identity' to refer to how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future. She refers to West's (1992) view of identity as it relates to the desire for recognition and affiliation (in Norton, 1997). This desire is inseparable from material resources in society, where those with access to such resources are accorded access to power and privilege. Thus identity shifts as social and economic relations change. Human agency and subjectivity (Weedon, 1987) are also foregrounded in her argument. Weedon's (1987) theory of subjectivity, for instance, also defines the multiple nature of the subject, subjectivity as a site of struggle, and subjectivity as changing over time.

Ivanic's (1998) work with mature-age students and how they construct their identity through their writing is also relevant. In her study, Ivanic (1998) examines students' discursive constructions of identity, and says that they construct a sense of self in their written texts. Their identity may be constructed differently each time, because people have multiple identities. Ivanic (1998:11) says that people "(identify) simultaneously with a variety of social groups". She adds:

Every time a writer constructs a discursive self, which draws on less privileged possibilities...they are like a drop in the ocean, infinitesimally redefining the possibilities...which will in turn be available for future writers (Ivanic, 1998: 28).

In summary, drawing on findings from New Literacy Studies and identity studies, there is an emerging need to explore the use of new electronic and digital literacies, and how learners construct themselves, their identities and make meaning through

their use. I shift now to examine the possibilities of constructing identities in online environments.

### *3.10.1 Constructing identity through technology*

With new technologies networking the world, computer-mediated communication produces a vast array of virtual communities (Castells, 1996:22). Castells (1996) emphasises that we should locate technological change in the social context in which it is taking place, and by which it is being shaped. He adds “We should keep in mind that the search for identity is as powerful as techno-economic change in charting new history” (Castells, 1996:4). Thus a study of identity within a technological framework is relevant to my work on online communities of practice.

In the borderless world of the Internet and computer mediated communication, where anonymity and the creation of persona are not uncommon, the construction of virtual identities is inevitable. In her book *Life on the screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Turkle (1995: 9) argues “(The Internet) links millions of people in new spaces that are changing the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities, our very identities”. She continues “The Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterise postmodern life” (Turkle, 1995:180). Users adopt identities that are multiple: real and virtual selves. Lam’s (2000) ethnographic study of Almon’s written correspondence with a group of peers on the Net, mentioned earlier, bears reference.

Identities may be constructed through personality, social roles, relationships and shared values. These may be manifest through the use of language, names and social

cues such as emoticons in virtual environments. In his study of identity and language use in teenage blogs<sup>89</sup>, Huffaker (2004), for example describes how American teenagers constructed their identities through their disclosure of personal information, their choice of online names and avatars<sup>90</sup>, and the use of emotive features.

Netspeak, or the language used on the Internet, as discussed in the previous chapter, is not always compliant with traditional language use. Examples include the use of acronyms, such as LOL (laugh out loud) and emoticons, such as smileys (☺) to convey mood in the absence of facial expression and gesture. In the representation of persona, participants may choose to use their own names or nicknames to construct their chosen identity<sup>91</sup>.

To recapitulate: my focus on online identities adopts the postmodern view of the subject as decentred, and identity as multiple and shifting. I examine how participants construct their identities through the use of language, name and emotional features, and analyse how they position themselves in relation to their responses to course themes, readings and social issues.

In the next section I shift perspective to examine learners and autonomy in online environments. As suggested by Lave and Wenger (1991), autonomous learners participate more effectively in COPs.

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<sup>89</sup> A weblog, or blog, as introduced in the previous chapter, is a journal that is designed and maintained *via* the Internet.

<sup>90</sup> Avatars are graphical icons that help represent a real person in a virtual context (Huffaker, 2004).

<sup>91</sup> Bechar-Israeli (1995, in Huffaker, 2004) found in his study of names used in chat rooms, that they could be categorised as follows: real names, self-related names, technology-related names, names of objects, plays on words and sounds, names related to literature, films, fairy tales and famous people, and provocative or sexual names.

### 3.11 Locating learner autonomy

Autonomy reflects a move away from the traditional teacher-dominated class to a more learner-centred one, where learners are expected to take charge of their learning goals and processes. Literature includes several synonyms for autonomy, including self-directed learning (SDL) (Knowles, 1975), learner autonomy (Thanasoulas, 2000), independence (Sheerin, 1991), language awareness (van Lier, 1996), self-direction (Candy, 1991) and andragogy (Knowles, 1980). This thesis uses the terms self-directed learning (SDL) or autonomy interchangeably.

SDL is a key element of active learning and is defined by Knowles (1975) as:

a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes (Knowles, 1975:18).

Simply put, Holec (1981) posits that autonomy is learners' ability to take charge of their own learning, independent of the teacher. Autonomous learners display certain characteristics including initiative, independence, persistence, a sense of responsibility for learning, curiosity, the ability to view problems as challenges, the desire to learn or change, and an enjoyment from learning. One of the questions I seek to answer in this study is the extent to which learners are autonomous in online environments. As already referred to in Chapter 1, technology can serve as an enabling tool for meeting the needs of self-directed learners (Silong *et al*, 1998) by creating connected networks of students, thus enabling more independence and interdependence among them.

There is agreement among theorists about the definition of learner autonomy constituting learner independence, as in independence from the teacher, where learners are able to take control of the learning situation by creating goals, planning

their learning, selecting their strategies and resources and evaluating their successes and failures (Knowles, 1975; Holec, 1981, 1988; Little, 1991; McGarry, 1995; Shannon, 2000; Seabrook, 2000). Little says autonomy is “a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action” (Little, 1991:14). Autonomous learners are responsible managers and owners of their learning. Autonomy integrates self-management with self-monitoring, where learners monitor, evaluate and regulate their learning strategies (Bolhuis, 1996), Garrison, 1997 in Abdullah, 2001a). Further characteristics, according to Kannan and MackNish (2000) include: knowing when to seek help from a tutor or peer, seeking other sources of help, setting goals, recognising strengths and weaknesses, understanding the importance of learning from mistakes, having an inquiring mind, learning through discovery, working at one’s own pace and managing time effectively, and making decisions. Little and Dam (1998) also establish the link with freedom, as in freedom from teacher control, freedom from curriculum constraints, and freedom not to learn. The freedom not to learn may be regarded as paradoxical to what learning involves, but the most important issue remains freedom to take control and make decisions.

Autonomy has to be nurtured, largely through the efforts of teachers and the strategies and materials they use. Traditional schooling still teaches students in ways that promote dependence, which leaves them poorly equipped to function beyond school (McGarry, 1995). Students who are encouraged to be responsible for their learning are therefore more likely to be autonomous. They are more likely to establish realistic goals and become efficient learners<sup>92</sup>. In Chapter 7 I ascertain the extent to which learners perceive they are autonomous in online environments.

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<sup>92</sup> Chan (2001), for instance, examined learners’ attitudes and expectations of language learning, teacher and learner roles, their learning preferences and perceptions of learner autonomy. In her study

With regard to content, Seabrook (2000) maintains it is not possible to teach learners all that they need to know, the 'fixed body of knowledge' theory. She also maintains that what is taught today may be obsolete or irrelevant tomorrow, hence the emphasis on lifelong learning. Learners should be given the skills to investigate and examine situations for themselves. Pemberton (in Ying, 2002) also sees learning as a lifelong process, which necessitates the need for learner autonomy. Ying (2002) suggests that:

only when learners are able to avail themselves to each learning opportunity rather than simply react to various stimuli from the teacher can they be skilful manipulators of language in their language learning process (2002:2).

If SDL appears to be regarded positively by researchers in the field, as indicated above, one might ask why it has been criticised in certain spheres. Seabrook (2000:1) argues that one of the reasons might be because of the notion that it is "cheap education". The notion arose from the belief that teachers are transferring their responsibilities onto learners. Certainly there are teachers for whom SDL offers an escape from their primary responsibilities. Initially, SDL was introduced at universities to manage large student numbers, but if it is introduced to overcome insufficient resources and staff, then it is inevitable that it will lead to poor results. Teachers and learners therefore need a clear idea of the rationale behind SDL as a pedagogic intervention.

It is not only independence that is the key to autonomy, but interdependence as well (Boud, 1981 in Toyoda, 2001). This also draws on Vygotsky's notion of learning as a

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of twenty second-year students in the English at the Workplace course at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Chan (2001) found that the majority of students felt that they wanted the teacher to play a dominant role, while also wanting to be more active in determining their learning goals and tasks. With regard to learner autonomy in particular, students responded positively. However, some learners felt that they were used to the teacher-dominated class, and felt they did not have the confidence to be autonomous.

social process, and Lave and Wenger's (1991, 1996, 2002) and Rogoff's (2003) notions of participation through assisted performance and interaction in communities of practice. According to Toyoda (2001:2):

Responsible learners know that, as long as learning takes place in social interactions, learning in isolation is impossible, and effective learning without mentors and peer support is difficult.

Troskie-de Bruin (in Greyling *et al*, 2002) described the learning stages as a continuum, which starts at dependence, moves through to counter-dependence, independence, then finally interdependence. If teaching methods and materials, for example, do not cater for independent learners, the learners may revert to dependence. Learners can, however, develop from dependence to counter-dependence. At this stage they may react against being dependent, but are still not fully responsible for their learning. This stage is followed by independence, where they take responsibility for their learning. The final stage, interdependence is where learners do not only take responsibility for their own learning, but for one another's as well. They are co-responsible, and at a stage which occurs in cooperative learning tasks.

#### *3.11.1 Four aspects of self-directed learners*

According to Candy (1991), and relating to Kannan and MackNish's characterisation of autonomy as presented earlier, self-directed learners are characterised by four aspects: personal autonomy, self-management, independent pursuit of learning, and learner control. The first aspect, personal autonomy, means having the disposition toward acting and thinking autonomously in all situations. Personal autonomy includes intellectual autonomy, where a person will not accept his or her beliefs on the authority of others, but on his or her own experience and sense of what is right or wrong; moral autonomy, which includes independent thought and the capacity to

carry into practice what one decides should be done; and emotional autonomy, where a person is able to exercise self-mastery in the face of strong emotional involvement.

The second aspect is self-management or self-regulation. Pintrich (in Greyling *et al*, 2002) suggests that self-management includes the regulation of behaviour and regulation of metacognitive strategies. The regulation of behaviour includes learners' control of knowledge and skills to utilise resources in an academic environment, such as time, a place to study, library facilities, technological resources, peers, teachers' motivation, and the learners' responsibility to control and change their attitudes, beliefs and goal orientation to motivate their success. Motivation is important in initiating and sustaining learners' efforts. Motivation enables learners to participate and see a task through to the end until goals are achieved (Corno, 1992, Garrison, 1997 in Abdullah, 2001). Metacognitive strategies refer to learners' skills in reflecting on their learning, when learners should be able to ask themselves periodically what they have learnt, what they need to learn, where they can find the information, how they learn, and how they progress.

The third aspect is the independent pursuit of learning. Although learning may be internal, researchers have to rely on observable manifestations of learning, such as demonstrated in portfolios and assignments, or get learners to report on their own internalised learning. Most learning occurs with assistance, and learners should be able to ask for assistance from teachers and peers when needed. SDL must therefore not be mistaken for a solitary endeavour, with learners functioning in isolation (refer also to Thang, 2005). Learners can assume responsibility within groups. This also emanates from sociocultural theories of learning, which see learning as occurring within a social context (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave and Wenger, 1999, 1996; Rogoff, 2003).

The fourth aspect, learner control, is where the learners take control over the learning process (Kreber in Greyling *et al*, 2002). People will vary in the degree to which they are prepared to take responsibility of their learning, but it is possible to enhance this kind of control and responsibility in learners by reviewing the strategies used, the tasks set and materials used. Learner control is also culturally located. Thus far, although SDL is regarded positively in the context of language learning, Thang (2001, 2005) argues that it is primarily a western, North American concept. While value is placed on SDL in North American culture, this is not always the case in other countries and cultures. Research conducted by Thang (2001, 2005) and Nah (2001) in Malaysia and China respectively, indicate the need for alternative sociocultural frameworks for autonomy<sup>93</sup>. Thus, not all learners may automatically be thought of as having the potential for self-direction or independence. Indeed in many cultures it may be difficult to come to terms with the notion of autonomy, especially in cultures where teachers are revered and seen as central in the process of learning (Motteram, 1998, Tudor in Motteram, 1998). The view concurs also with Pennycook's (1997), that language education should include the wider social, cultural, and political concerns. The influence of sociocultural factors stimulated me to examine my learners' perceptions of autonomy from an African perspective. This is important in the sense that learners bring to the classroom cultural norms, values and beliefs, and should teachers in South Africa frame autonomous learning environments from a North American perspective, there will be inevitable cultural clashes. Thus I believe

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<sup>93</sup> Thang (2001, 2005) explains that while her Malaysian learners do not display the commonly accepted features characterising autonomy in the western sense, this does not mean that they are not autonomous. Nah (2001) also studied the cultural implications of self-directed learning. She found that other cultural groups do not value independence and autonomy as virtues. She interviewed five Korean women in management positions to understand their learning processes. She found that they viewed becoming independent without becoming interdependent immature and self-centred. Nah (2001) recommends therefore that educators consider cultural background before assuming that SDL is the way to proceed, and that interdependence and community-building be considered.

there is a need to examine autonomy within an African framework, which takes into account learners' belief systems. I examine learners' responses in some detail in Chapter 7 to examine their responses to a North American model of autonomy.

### *3.11.2 Factors expediting learner autonomy*

Lee (in Ying, 2002) suggests three factors that are crucial to the development of learner autonomy: learner choice, a supporting environment and self-assessment. Learner choice implies the learners' ability to work at their own pace, and to ask key questions related to their learning. The question of choice in learning emanates from constructivist theories of learning, which emphasise that learners acquire new knowledge based on the old, and that the learner is active in his own learning process.

The supportive environment also stems from social constructivism. Learning is seen as an essentially social process that occurs within a social context, through interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave and Wenger, 1991, 1996). An important criterion for a supporting environment is flexibility in learning (Pemberton in Ying, 2002). It is important that the learning process is not too rigid, and that learners are able to reflect on their learning. Learners can change their objectives and the process of learning based on their needs. Teacher and peer support are essential in a supporting environment. Control shifts from teachers to learners. Learners are able to participate more independently by establishing learning goals as well as how they approach learning tasks (Lyman, 1997, Morrow, Sharkey and Firestone, 1993 in Abdullah, 2001).

Self-assessment, or the checking of one's performance on a task during and after it has been completed is also an important characteristic of autonomous learning (Richards and Platt, in Ying, 2002).

### 3.11.3 *Evaluating learner autonomy*

While it is not possible to quantify self-direction in learners, it is possible to measure a learners' *propensity* for self-direction, one such tool being Guglielmino's (1977,1997) Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS). Guglielmino (1977,1997) designed a 58-item Likkert scale to measure the degree to which people perceive themselves as having the skills and attitudes typically associated with the term "self-directed learning" (Greyling *et al*, 2002). The scale yields a total highest score of 290, indicating the learner to be the ideal self-directed learner. The average score worldwide reported by Guglielmino (in Greyling *et al*, 2002) is 214. Guglielmino (in Silong, Ibrahim, Asmuni, 1998) suggested that the characteristics necessary for self-direction include initiative, independence, persistence, sense of responsibility, curiosity, ability to view problems as challenges, desire to learn and enjoyment from learning.

In my study I do not apply the scale quantitatively, as a means of measuring autonomy. Instead I select key dimensions from the scale as a framework of the participant interview schedule to elicit participants' views on autonomy in technological environments. This will be explained in greater detail in Chapter 5. Having defined autonomy, in the section to follow I examine the concept in technological environments.

#### *3.11.4 Autonomy in technological environments*

Having defined and examined learner autonomy in relation to learning, the question that arises in my study is the extent to which participants perceive that the online environment supports autonomy. Empirical studies bear testimony of the positive effects of autonomy in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) environments. In certain contexts it has been found that CALL environments motivate students to become autonomous, set their own goals, work at their own pace, think critically and assess themselves. Ying's (2002) study is relevant here. She investigated the extent to which thirty students participating in a CALL project at Suzhou University in China attained autonomy<sup>94</sup>. Ying's (2002) focus of enquiry included whether students are able to set their own goals and pace, in what way peers and teachers provide support, and how students take responsibility for self-evaluation. She found that the CALL research project provided a new opportunity for the development of autonomous learning. Learners were able to enjoy the range of choices and take responsibility for most aspects of their learning. Learners who were generally too dependent on teachers were able to work in a supportive atmosphere. Students helped one another and shared confidences. With regard to assessment, students were able to assess themselves after having completed several self-assessment tasks during the project. Students were able to produce varied and creative language. They felt challenged that they were working on real-world abilities, that is, on what they would need to do in the real world. Ying (2002) recommends pre-project training, making the purpose of the project clear and

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<sup>94</sup> The project involved students selecting topics for research, finding information off the Net, designing interview schedules, publishing their findings on Web pages, and presenting their data using Powerpoint or hyperlinked Web pages. Student writing was also collected, students were interviewed, their reflections were analysed, as were the writer's observation notes.

strengthening of inner-group co-operation in order to facilitate SDL in online environments.

In another study, Kurek (2002) approached SDL from the perspective of student preparation. She felt that traditional ESL college training was not sufficient to prepare students for the challenges of the academic and workplace requirements. Kurek (2002) proposed the WebProject to promote active, autonomous learning and to foster critical thinking skills<sup>95</sup>, and she too recommended technical training and advised the need for carefully scaffolded instructions.

In a study conducted by Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002), students' readiness for learner autonomy in language learning was examined. They found that motivation played a key role in autonomy<sup>96</sup>. Spratt *et al* (2002) found that students felt that formal learning was the teachers' responsibility, but took responsibility for themselves in outside informal learning opportunities. Students also felt that they did not have opportunities to make decisions. The absence of motivation seemed to inhibit learner autonomy. The researchers recommend that teachers begin by increasing motivation levels in students before embarking on learner autonomy.

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<sup>95</sup> Kurek (2002) worked with second year students at the Wyzsza School of Languages in Czestochowa. The project was intended to foster the confident use of technology, the acquisition of a range of lexical items, the ability to conduct Web searches, to evaluate and select information and to foster higher order thinking skills. Students produced a three-part project, consisting of an oral, a visual and a written component.

<sup>96</sup> Spratt, Humphrey's and Chan (2002) studied 508 students in their first, second or third year of study at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. They used questionnaires to elicit data on whose responsibility students felt learning should be (teachers or students), students' views of their ability to manage aspects of learning, students' level of motivation and actual activities in which students were engaged.

Toyoda (2001) examined how technology affects the exercise of learner autonomy in the ProCALL Project<sup>97</sup>. Her findings suggest that technology can have a positive impact on learner autonomy when learners have extensive experience with technology, and when learners perceive it to be a useful tool. She concluded that three conditions are necessary for successful autonomous learning: accessible and reliable technology, sufficient computer literacy among students and good communication and support from peers.

Finally, Fang and Warschauer (2004) conducted a five-year study of a technology-enhanced English Language Teaching project in China. The study included international e-mail exchange projects, and Net-based research tasks. They found that Net-based projects enabled students to take the initiative and become more autonomous in their learning. However, from a Chinese cultural perspective, some students felt uncomfortable being autonomous, and questioned the role of the teacher in an autonomous learning environment<sup>98</sup>, which brings to mind earlier my point on using North American models of autonomy among other cultural groups.

Although various international studies have been conducted in the field already, the focus of my project emanated from the paucity of research conducted in the field in the South African higher education online context. The studies thus far show that SDL should be approached holistically. Teachers cannot only use materials that they think will promote autonomy, if changes are not made at a curricular level, or teaching

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<sup>97</sup> Toyoda (2001) conducted her study at the University of Melbourne, Australia. She used questionnaires and interviewed fifty five students. She also used weekly logs of five teachers and observational notes made by IT officers.

<sup>98</sup> Other findings of the study included interaction and relevance. Fang and Warschauer (2004) found that the projects enabled greater student interaction, and longer pieces of writing than traditional English courses at Chinese universities. The projects also provided ground for course content and issues of concern in students' lives, including equipping them with job market skills, such as the valuable combination of English and technological skills.

strategies do not change. SDL should also not be developed independently of course content (Greyling *et al*, 2002). It is necessary that course objectives and outcomes stipulate that students become successful self-directed learners. Approaches that increase independence in learning include making use of learners' existing knowledge structures, learner participation, encouraging deep level thinking, developing critical thinking, enhancing reading skills, improving comprehension and creating a supportive climate for learning. These should be evident in materials and resources used in the classroom. In online classrooms, specific features promote SDL, and these warrant some discussion.

#### *3.11.5 Features promoting self-directed learning in online environments*

Specific features that are fundamental to online environments may be seen to promote SDL. These features include frequently asked questions (FAQs), discussion threads, bulletin boards, chat rooms and e-mail. Students may use such features to address issues they feel unsure of. These features allow students to attempt to solve problems on their own, as well as, in the case of discussion threads, to interact with the facilitator and other students. Students may, in this way take control and ownership of the learning process. However, students may not always automatically feel comfortable using the features if they are not motivated to do so. They may feel threatened by the new strategies if they are used to teacher-centred classes, or if they are not technologically literate. Conversely, empirical evidence confirms that there is positive change in learner autonomy when using ICT (Ying, 2002; Kurek, 2002; Spratt *et al*, 2002; Toyoda, 2001; Fang and Warschauer, 2004). It also follows that if a student demonstrates a tendency for self-direction under traditional circumstances, these may be improved in an online environment, provided the student has the technological skills in order to do so.

### **3.12 Reflections**

This chapter provides a theoretical and conceptual framework for the thesis by examining relevant learning theories, and linking these to projects exploring the link between autonomy and learning in online environments. I began by presenting the basic elements of a constructivist approach, then establishing a link between constructivism and the learning theories of Vygotsky (1978), Rogoff (2003) and Lave and Wenger (1991). I established connections between language and literacy studies by referring to New Literacy Studies, where literacy is conceptualised as a social practice, and the advent of technology is viewed as a new literacy. I presented Gee's (1996) view that literacies entail social identities in apprenticed-communities, and went on to deconstruct identity based on the views of Castells (1996), Hall (1992) and Norton (1995, 1997, 2000). In summary, these theories provide a conceptual framework, which together provides a basis for my investigation into online communities of practice, in particular, around issues of electronic literacy practice, identity-construction, and autonomy in online environments. In Chapter 4 I present the research design and methods to be used in the project located at the University of the Witwatersrand.

## **PART II:**

### **Design, methodology and implications**

## CHAPTER 4

### Research design and methodology

#### 4.1 Introduction

Having established connections between overlapping concepts in sociocultural theory, communities of practice, literacy, identity, and autonomy, as well as why a study of literacy and identity in online communities is valuable in relation to a study of autonomy in technological environments, I present the research design of my project, which is named the Online English Project (OLEP), first by recapitulating the questions that provide focus for my thesis in general.

I discuss the qualitative case study as the most appropriate approach to my research, and include discussion of weaknesses and strengths of case studies, as well as issues of validity and reliability. I present the timeline for the project as a five-phase flow chart, where the first three phases of the project are the planning and implementation of the pilot study (Phase 1), and the planning and implementation of the first and second semesters of the final study (Phases 2 and 3). I also explain how I gained access to the pilot and final sites, namely, the Durban Institute of Technology (DIT) and the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), the courses, Language Dynamics (at DIT) and Foundation in English (at Wits), and the participants. I discuss the findings of my pilot study at DIT, and show how these helped shape the final project to be implemented at Wits. A multi-faceted approach to collecting data in the study is also presented, as is the participant sample, with a view to providing the overall design of the project.

## 4.2 Recapitulating the key research questions

The motivation for this project arose from my interest in the field of ICT in English teaching, having attended various courses in online learning, both in face-to-face and online situations. I have also implemented such practices in my own higher education English classes in South Africa over the past four to five years. My interest arose from my observations that undergraduate students appeared to be more empowered when given the opportunity to use online strategies. This was a valuable insight, compared to the conventional teacher-centred classes, where students were seemingly quite inactive in the learning process. Despite setbacks such as the current lack of infrastructure and resources at many South African universities, and student and teacher under-preparedness for online learning in South Africa, I was motivated to further explore this field that was relatively new to me.

To recap, my primary research question is:

To what extent do English non-mother tongue speakers in a university English classroom engage in communities of practice in online spaces?

Recognising that communities of practice involve negotiation of meaning, participation and the establishment of relationships, all of which are facilitated by the construction of participant-identities, I ask the following sub-questions:

1. What are the electronic (ICT)-literacy practices of higher education English non-mother tongue speakers, and how do these practices shape their perceptions of ICT-use in an English language classroom?
2. What relationships do the participants develop in online environments?
3. How do the participants construct identities in online environments?
4. To what extent do participants perceive themselves autonomous in online environments?

In order to further my investigation, I decided to conduct a qualitative case study of the implementation of selected ICT interventions in a higher education English classroom in South Africa, with participants who had limited previous exposure to ICT. The pilot project of the case study lasted one semester, or fourteen weeks, while

the final project spanned one academic year of two semesters, or fourteen weeks each.

The rationale and characteristics of this choice are explained in the next section.

### **4.3 The qualitative case study**

Qualitative research is regarded as a ‘soft’ science, concerned with exploratory, personal research and consequently open to bias. However, I found Denzin and Lincoln’s (1998) view of the approach particularly suitable:

Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspective, life story...that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives. Accordingly, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected methods, hoping always to get a better fix on the subject matter at hand (1998:3).

It was important for me to be able to observe students and have conversations with them about their work, and this would not have been quantifiable. I found that the approach helped me explore issues relating not merely to participant use of ICT within the classroom, but to how the participants made meaning, and perceived autonomy in the online environment. The qualitative approach has also been successfully adopted by other researchers in the field of ICT in the language classroom<sup>99</sup>.

Prior to implementing the case study I conducted a pilot study spanning a semester (fourteen weeks) at Durban Institute of Technology, where I taught at the time, in order to explore the emerging field of ICT in language learning. The use of the pilot study is recommended by Janesick (1998) because it allows the researcher to focus on particular areas that may have been unclear in the original design of the project. The

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<sup>99</sup> Refer, for example, to qualitative studies conducted by O’Dowd (2004), Warschauer (1996a) and Kern and Warschauer (2000), as well as qualitative case studies discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

pilot study helped in terms of re-shaping the project for its final implementation at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Although case studies are perceived differently by theorists, common principles emerge. Cresswell, for instance refers to the case study as:

a single entity or phenomenon (the case) bounded by time and activity (a program, event, process, institution, or social group) (which) collects detailed information by using a variety of data collection procedures during a sustained period of time (in Leedy, 1997:157).

Stake (1998:87), however, argues that the concept is debatable as “a case study is both the process of learning about the case and the product of our learning”. Case studies may be studied in terms of single cases because of their individual unique qualities, or as multiple cases to “make comparison, build theory, and propose generalisability,” the purpose of which may be “to shed light on a phenomenon, be it a process, event, person, or object of interest to the researcher” (Leedy, 1997:157). According to the Colorado State University website (1997-2004) the case study is a collection and presentation of detailed information about a particular participant or small group. It examines the interplay of variables to get to an understanding of an event or situation using thick description. Thick description involves in-depth description of what is being evaluated, the circumstances being used, the characteristics of the people involved, and the community within which it is located. Gall, Borg and Gall (in Leedy, 1997) agree that the purpose is generally to produce detailed descriptions of a phenomenon, to develop possible explanations for it, or to evaluate the phenomenon.

Nisbet and Watt, and Adelman (in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000), as well as Yin (1994) agree that the case is a specific instance that is designed to illustrate a more general principle. Broadly, the case study may be “instance in action”

(Adelman in Cohen *et al*, 2000: 181). This means that the researcher may select an instance from a class of objects that is being investigated, in order to examine the way in which it functions in context. Yin (1994) concurs with his definition of the case study as:

an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used (Yin, 1994:23).

Case study research thus enables people to examine real people in real situations, thus enabling them to understand ideas more clearly than presenting them with abstract theories and principles (Cohen *et al*, 2000). The purpose of the case study may therefore be seen as “to portray, analyse and interpret the uniqueness of real individuals and situations through accessible accounts”; “to catch the complexity and situatedness of behaviour”; “to contribute to action and intervention” and “to present and represent reality – to give a sense of ‘being there’” (Cohen *et al*, 2000: 79).

Methodologically, the case study is a ‘hybrid’ because it utilises a range of methods for the selection and analysis of data, rather than being restricted to a single procedure (Nunan, 1992:74). It is open to the use of qualitative methods as well as quantitative data and statistical methods. This option was favorable for my research because I wanted to examine not just Internet-based practices, but participation and negotiation of meaning in online environments. To examine how learners negotiate meaning I examined how they participated and constructed identities, as well as their perceptions of autonomy in online environments. In order to do this I needed to adopt an approach that allowed for the use of a variety of techniques such as observations, interviews, survey questionnaires, and written data, such as their electronic literacy histories, messages posted on discussion threads, and facilitator diaries. I wanted to elicit data

from various sources, including school managers and students, as well as make my own observations. Thus, a holistic picture is allowed to emerge, which supports the notion that human systems have a wholeness, rather than a loose connection of traits (Stuurman in Cohen *et al*, 2000). In Geertz's (in Cohen *et al*, 2000) view the case study should therefore strive to portray what the experience is like in a particular situation and to catch the close-up reality of participants' lived experiences of, thoughts about and feelings for a situation.

#### *4.3.1 Weaknesses and strengths of case studies*

Although I adopted the case study, I acknowledge the weaknesses reported by Schofeld, Nisbett and Watt (in Cohen *et al*, 2000). They criticise case study research for its weakness for following the interpretative paradigm of seeing research through the eyes of participants, rather than through the quantitative paradigm. Smith (in Cohen *et al*, 2000), for argues that:

The case study method... is the logically weakest method of knowing. The study of individual careers, communities, nations, and so on has become essentially passé. Recurrent patterns are the main product of the enterprise of historic scholarship (2000: 183).

Another limitation, suggested by Nisbett and Watt (in Cohen *et al*, 2000), is the lack of generalisability of case studies. They suggest the possibility that case studies are not easily open to cross-checking, which may lead to selectivity, observer bias and subjectivity. Subjectivity, for instance, relies on personal interpretation of data. I was conscious that as teacher-researcher, this could be problematic for me. Therefore I relied on a multimethod approach, and kept a diary where I recorded notes of informal discussions and observations. I explain the methods in more detail later in this chapter. Schofeld (1993) further comments that the major weakness of the case study is that the focus of single case studies in qualitative research is inconsistent with the

requirements of statistical sampling procedures, which enable data to be generalised from one study to larger populations.

However, despite the possible weaknesses acknowledged by theorists, my focus on the case study as a research approach were its benefits such as its strength in reality (Adelman in Cohen *et al*, 2000). In Huysamen's (1994) view, although the case study allows for a limited number of units of analysis (often only one), such an individual, group or institution, are studied intensively. This I found a positive point in my research because I was able to study a small group intensively for the year. Because it involves only a few subjects, case studies may provide only weak support for the drawing of scientific conclusions but are useful for providing ideas for future research using more controlled settings (Huysamen, 1994: 168). The strengths then are its flexibility, intensive focus on the participants, and its reliance on thick description.

It is typical that case study researchers spend an extended period of time on-site with their subjects (Leedy, 1997). As a teacher at both institutions at the time the research was conducted, I had extensive contact with students and other teaching staff. I also collected data from a variety of sources, as previously mentioned. Further, I had informal access to participants, which expedited the data gathering process. Typically, in a case study, data may be gathered from a wide variety of sources, and may be presented from the perspective of the participants. Kirk and Miller (in Leedy, 1997:157) describe this as "watching people in their own territory and interacting with them in their own language, on their own terms". Whichever technique is used for the purpose of data collection, the concern is not merely with a description of what is being observed, but to search, in an inductive fashion, for recurring patterns and consistent regularities. Thus, I followed Huysamen's (1994) recommendation that in

order to discern patterns, triangulation, or the process of using multiple data collection methods, data sources, analysts or theories to check the validity of the findings, be used.

#### *4.3.2 Reliability and validity in case studies*

The absence of a single common standard of ascertaining reliability and validity in qualitative studies is evident. I adopted to use Altheide and Johnson's (in Leedy, 1997) recommendations for establishing validity. They recommend the value of usefulness, contextual completeness, research positioning and reporting style. 'Usefulness' refers to whether the report enlightens those who read it. 'Contextual completeness' refers to how comprehensive a view of the situation is provided, in terms of providing background information, physical setting, activities, schedules and routines of participants, as well as their perceptions. 'Research positioning' refers to the researchers' awareness of their own influences in the setting. These influences should be made explicit so that readers can establish the credibility of the study for themselves. 'Reporting style' is also an important variable because it can influence credibility. The researcher's reporting style must be perceived to be an authentic reflection of the participants' perceptions.

In the pilot and main projects I attempted to ensure validity in terms of my choice of participants, approach and methods by providing a contextually complete report on my study, inclusive of background details, setting and participants' activities and schedules. I have also maintained the position that as facilitator at the pilot and the final sites, I was a 'participant observer' because I knew and interacted extensively with the students participating in the study. I was further conscious of cultural differences, and that as a black female of Indian origin, it could have created a divide

between us, as most of the subjects were of black African origin. Although we could relate as facilitator and student, I spent much time getting to know the participants as individuals. I was also aware that I was in a position of power because of ICT-access issues. I had access to technology at home and at work, while most of the students only had access to ICT at the institution. The digital divide was therefore present in the classes I taught, although this was a gap I wanted to narrow.

I attempted to ensure construct validity, that is, establishing the correct operational measures for the concepts (Yin, 1994). However, I found it problematic to establish external validity, that is, establishing the population to which a study's findings can be generalised, and reliability, by way of demonstrating that the study can be replicated with similar results. The only way in which I was able to do this was through the pilot study at DIT, which formed the basis for the design of the final project that was implemented at the University of the Witwatersrand.

I further adopted what Gall *et al* (in Leedy, 1997:168) suggest for achieving what they call "trustworthiness" in qualitative study: triangulation, member checking<sup>100</sup>, chain of evidence, pattern matching and representativeness checking which may be used for validity, and long-term involvement and coding checks for reliability. I adopted a triangulated approach (the process of using multiple data collection methods, data sources, analysts or theories to check the validity of the findings), as referred to by Leedy (1997) and Huysamen (1997). In order to attain triangulation in this study a range of methods and instruments were used to elicit data from various angles around the research questions. These are discussed extensively in the section on data collection. I attempted to ensure validity by way of member checking by asking

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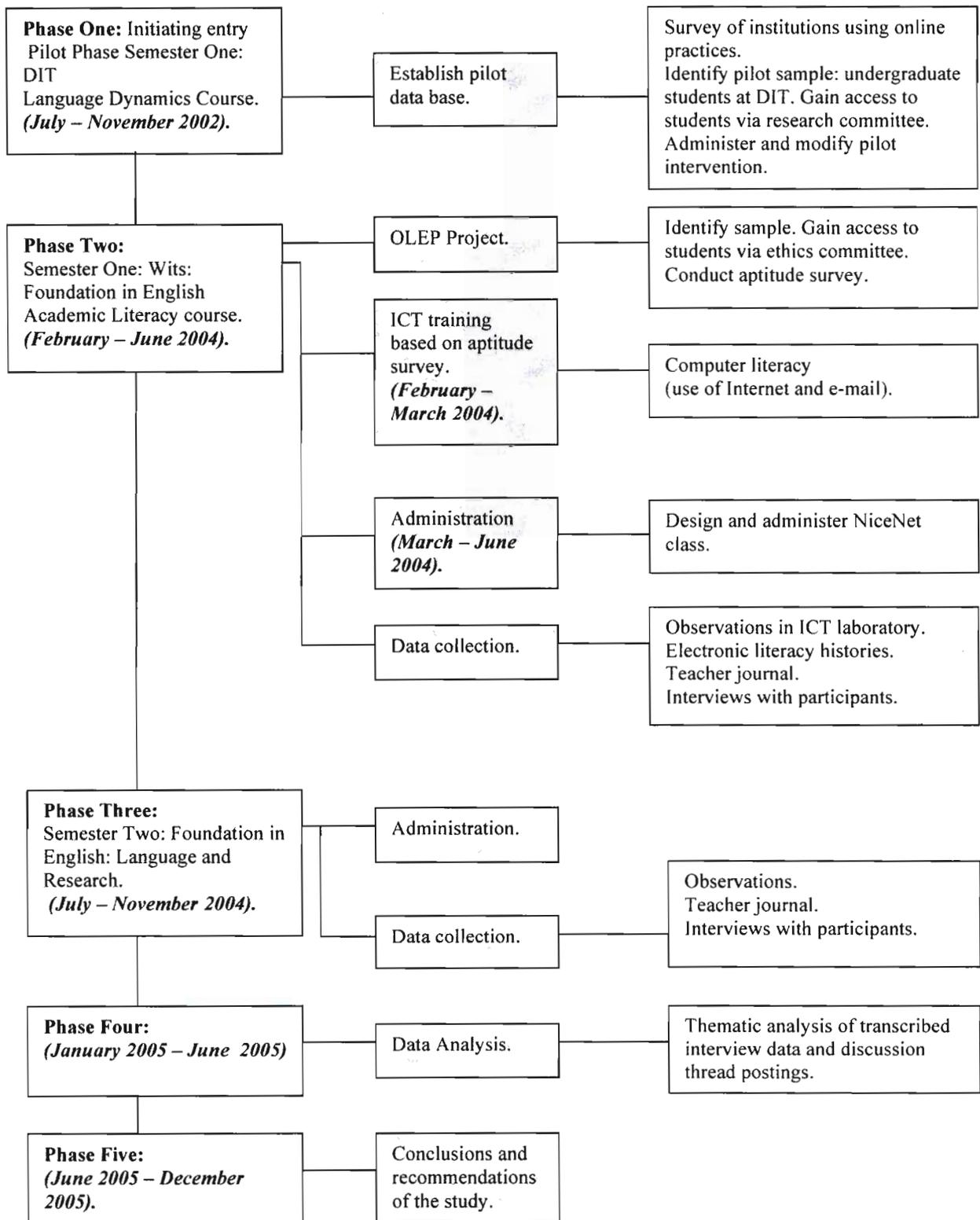
<sup>100</sup> Member checking involves participants checking transcripts and reports for accuracy.

interviewees to check transcripts of recorded interviews for accuracy. Long-term involvement refers to the process where data is collected over long periods of time, enabling the researcher to establish consistent trends from situational occurrences. In my study, I could not opt for extensive observations because of time constraints, and therefore settled for shorter observation schedules, however, my work spanned a period of a year, as well as a semester for the pilot study, which might be considered long-term.

#### **4.4 Project plan: The Online English project (OLEP)**

In Figure 4.4 that follows overleaf I present a diagrammatic representation of OLEP, which provides the pilot and final case study phases of the project.

Figure 4.4: Online English Language Project (OLEP): Research design



#### 4.4.1 Phase One: Initiating entry and site selection for the pilot phase of OLEP

Because Internet-based strategies are being used sporadically at South African higher education institutions, I experienced initial difficulty trying to establish suitable sites and key participants for the study. These are difficulties also mentioned by Walker (in Cohen *et al*, 2000) and Morse (1998) as key problems in case study research. The sites were selected following extensive Internet searches of the websites of English departments in higher education institutions in South Africa. Individual lecturers were then contacted at the relevant institutions in order to ascertain what ICT practices they were using in their teaching<sup>101</sup>. Of the responses received, I found that the courses and strategies being used at the various institutions too dissimilar to be comparable. The responses received are tabulated below:

*Figure 4.4.1: English courses at South African universities adopting online practices*

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Course</b>
University of Stellenbosch	Rhetoric and Thinking
University of Cape Town	Online Writing
University of the Witwatersrand	Internet Literacies; Writing
University of the North	English Language

At the time I was also implementing ICT strategies in my Language Dynamics class at Durban Institute of Technology. Figure 4.4.1 reflects the responses of course instructors who responded to my queries and, as such, is not representative of all the institutions in South Africa. Responses were received from individual lecturers teaching specific courses, and cannot be generalised to an entire department or discipline at a particular institution. Of the responses received, it is evident that the use of online strategies is not a widespread method of choice in English teaching and learning. Also, I wanted to ascertain current practice at institutions that offered conventional face-to-face classes, rather than distance institutions<sup>102</sup>, given the nature of my job was not at a distance education institution. Given the unevenness of

<sup>101</sup> Please refer to Appendix 1 for a copy of the survey questionnaire sent to lecturers.

<sup>102</sup> Such as the University of South Africa (UNISA).

applications as evident from the responses, I opted to study ICT practices at Durban Institute of Technology using my own practice as a basis for the pilot project.

Durban Institute of Technology is situated in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, where I taught at the time I started this study in 2002, and provided the setting for the pilot study. The final case study was conducted at the University of the Witwatersrand, in Gauteng, South Africa, where I later taught, from 2003. It was therefore not difficult to gain access to both institutions, and prevented what Morse (1998) refers to as time-consuming negotiation of entry. I was already teaching at the particular institutions and could negotiate entry quite easily as an insider. Although both institutions offer very different English courses, the overarching objective at both is to teach English language, which made the selection suitable. A description of the pilot site follows.

#### *4.4.2 Merged institutions: Durban Institute of Technology*

Durban Institute of Technology, which is situated in the central business district of Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, was established as a result of the merger between ML Sultan Technikon (MLST) and Technikon Natal (TN) in April 2002. One of the aims of the institution is to train skilled graduates who are equipped to meet the demands of the workplace and the needs of a changing society (<http://www.dit.ac.za>, August 2003). Although both institutions are located in the same geographical vicinity (literally across the road from one another), Technikon Natal historically catered for a white student population, while ML Sultan Technikon catered for a black student population<sup>103</sup>. The teaching and administrative staff at MLST was predominantly black, originally of Indian origin, but was beginning to include staff of other race

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<sup>103</sup> Separation along racial lines was the norm during the apartheid era, and was evident in all social, economic, political, and educational spheres.

groups when I started my research. Although staff at TN was predominantly white, other race groups were being employed at the institution with the introduction of Affirmative Action and Employment Equity policies. Over recent years, both institutions had been admitting students of all race groups, although both institutions remained largely white (TN), and black (MLST), respectively, in terms of dominant student numbers. Both institutions had a Department of Language and Communication. At the time this project was conducted, the departments were still functioning separately in most courses, although staff members had begun to communicate and work on merging the aims and objectives of their particular courses. I conducted research with students studying the Diploma in Language Practice, which was only being taught at the MLST campus. It is for this reason that my pilot research was confined to the MLST campus, specifically, the Department of Language and Communication.

#### *4.4.3 The Language Practice Diploma and Language Dynamics module*

At the time the pilot project was initiated, the Department of Language and Communication<sup>104</sup> was a service department that offered courses in Communication Skills, English and Business Communication to students in the faculties of Science, Engineering, Arts and Commerce. The objectives of the Department were to improve the written, spoken and graphic communication skills of students in the context of their diplomas and eventual careers. The Department also placed emphasis on clear thinking to achieve a concise and accurate style of communication, ultimately leading to the workplace.

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<sup>104</sup> The Department is currently named the Department of English and Communication.

The Language Practice Diploma was started in 2000 because of the need for language practitioners, such as translators, interpreters and editors in industry. This was also as a result of the adoption of eleven official languages in the country (*Constitution of South Africa*, Act no. 108). The Diploma course spanned three years, which could be continued as a Bachelor of Technology degree, and later, a Masters and Doctorate in Technology (Language Dynamics Course Outline, 2002). Over the duration of the year, each course consisted of four modules, with two modules per semester. Each semester covered a fourteen-week cycle, with two modules being completed in the course of one semester. A brief description of each module in Year Two follows:

- *Module One* examines sociocultural issues in language, such as language variety, idiolect, sociolect, dialect, speech communities, knowledge literacy, and language as a semiotic weapon.
- *Module Two* looks at language in general practice, and consists of methods of language teaching, language strategies and language and management styles.
- *Module Three* examines image-building activities related to language and the media, as well as copy writing and advertising.
- *Module Four* consists of the planning of seminars and conferences, speech writing, and is largely focussed towards public relations (Course outline, 2002).

I conducted my pilot study with students in Module One because this was the module I was responsible for in the year I initiated my project. I was also the course co-ordinator. The outcomes of Module One are as follows:

The learner will be able to:

- recognise that language is used differently in different sociocultural environments;
- distinguish the impact of language on different lifestyles in terms of segmentation (age, sex, status, class, culture);
- recognise the relationship between language and power (Course outline, 2002).

The course was taught using methods such as formal lectures, co-operative group work, panel discussions, and analysis of media sources (such as news media articles and video recordings) on current topics. The course consisted of four forty-five minute lectures per week. Having seen that students lacked ICT proficiency, although

they were interested in its use, I introduced an ICT component to the course, which is described later in this chapter.

#### *4.4.4 Initiating the pilot project*

I chose to use purposive non-probability sampling, which is usually based on the researcher's knowledge of the research area and the important opinion-makers in the field (Sarantakos, 1998). Such a sample is not determined randomly, but purposefully and is appropriate for case studies and hard-to-find target populations. Because the choice of sampling is subjective, bias cannot be ruled out. However, the type of sampling makes it possible to measure many variables, and allows for qualitative and quantitative analysis.

The subjects of the pilot study were twenty-one undergraduate English second and additional language speakers, attending the MLST campus of DIT. Ten were male and eleven were female, aged between eighteen and twenty-four years old. All were registered for the Language Practice Diploma.

Before implementing the pilot project, initial survey questionnaires were used to evaluate computer access, proficiency, experience and willingness to participate in an online project as part of the course<sup>105</sup>. I trained less proficient students in ICT use, based on their responses to the survey. This had, of necessity, to be done in an *ad hoc* manner, because the institution did not have computer laboratories for teaching purposes. Small groups were trained to use Internet and e-mail and less proficient students were paired with more able students within the class to practise newly-

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<sup>105</sup> I discuss these survey questionnaires in more detail in the final project implemented at the University of the Witwatersrand.

acquired skills, thus initiating what Lave and Wenger (1991, 1996, 2002) would term ‘communities of practice’.

Both computer access and proficiency were limited, as most of the students came from rural and township areas, where they did not have access to technological resources, and in certain cases, to electricity in their schools<sup>106</sup>. Of the twenty-one students, only two had access to computers outside the institution. The institution had one computer laboratory for the Faculty of Humanities, with thirty computers that had to be available to all students in the Faculty. Students had to make reservations to use the facilities, and reported that often several of the computers were faulty. Students also did not have e-mail addresses, and had to be shown how to create free e-mail addresses.

It also bears mention that this pilot project was conducted during the second semester of their second year (2002), and by that time I assumed that many of the students would have made use of the facilities at the computer laboratories for the purpose of word processing assignments or conducting Internet research. In the sections to follow I briefly examine students’ computer usage, proficiency, and their initial views on the use of ICT in the course.

#### *4.4.4.1 Computer usage, proficiency and perceptions of students*

As expected, most of the students had, by this time in their studies, the second semester, used computers to word process assignments. Figure 4.4.4.1 reflects students’ use of ICT before the pilot project.

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<sup>106</sup> 85% of the students in the pilot study came from rural or township areas.

Figure 4.4.4.1: Student use of ICT at DIT

	Students who had used technology		Students who had not used technology	
	Number	%	Number	%
Computers	18	85.7	3	14.28
E-mail	2	9.6	19	90.4
Internet	5	23.8	16	76.2

Students in the pilot project were primarily self-taught, or had learnt by observing others. Those students who had used e-mail or the Net previously (9.6% and 23.8% respectively), had done so by ‘experimentation’, meaning that they had not received formal lessons in computer usage. The Net was used for random surfing, or to a lesser extent, for research purposes. The majority (76%) said they were too intimidated to access the Internet, or it felt it was too much work to gain access at the institution. The next section examines their computer proficiency.

Students’ ICT proficiency levels were not tested, rather I relied on their perceptions of their proficiency. Their proficiency levels are reflected in Figure 4.4.4.2:

Figure 4.4.4.2: ICT Proficiency Levels at DIT

	Low proficiency		Average proficiency		High proficiency	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Computer	10	47.6	7	33.3	4	19.0
E-mail and internet	17	80.9	2	9.5	2	9.5

Although students said they saw the need to use technology in their studies and later in their jobs, only 19% claimed to be very proficient in its use. Sandy<sup>107</sup> said:

I live too far...to travel is very hard every day. Sometimes I use the computers, but if I can handwrite it is better because the computers are full. The timetable even is very full...no time to go (to the lab) (Interview, 20 August, 2002).

She added that she did not have access to ICT at her home, or in the township she lived in. Phumi, another student, also felt that while ICT had its advantages, she thought that students had to be trained when they started using it. She said about e-mail, for instance: “It is not hard to do when you know e-mail, but someone must

<sup>107</sup> The real names of students are not used in order to maintain their privacy.

show you what it can do...it's ability" (Interview, 20 August, 2002). These findings about students' lack of ICT proficiency were not surprising, considering that they came from poorly-resourced schools. In the section to follow I examine students' initial views on the integration of technology with the course.

None of the students in the pilot study had used Internet-based practices in any of their classes before, and they regarded the project with a mixture of enthusiasm and trepidation. Some saw the project as one that would help them become computer literate, while others saw it in a more global perspective, which would enable them to communicate with students from other cultural groups and parts of the world. Bongi had this to say: "Technology is global, it will help me get a job. I will take any help I can get with computers, and maybe this course will help me (Interview, 20 August, 2002).

These findings concur with Fang and Warschauer's (2004), that the use of ICT promotes relevant job market skills. At this stage, the only way in which students in the pilot study were expected to use ICT was to word process assignments, however this was not a requirement in all their courses. They were also required, on limited occasions, to conduct research on the Net, and this I was told by the participants, in only one other course.

In addition to the initial access and proficiency survey, other methods were adopted. The course included students keeping journals, which I collected and read every fortnight. I asked students to reflect on the project in their journals. Students were also interviewed in small groups of three or four at the end of the project. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Because it was a small class, the students and I

had several opportunities to engage in conversation throughout the semester. I made note of comments made by students that were pertinent to the project, in a diary. The following sections report on the pilot project.

#### *4.4.5 Findings and discussion of the pilot project*

The pilot project involved two online practices: participation in an e-pal project, and a web course, which I designed to run parallel to the conventional class. Both e-pal projects and web courses are described extensively in the literature review. In the section to follow I examine the e-pal component of the pilot project.

The pilot project set out to examine how students communicate in online environments. The aim of the e-pal project was for students to become involved in communicative situations with students around the world in order for them to engage in cross-cultural discussions, and to engage in additional discussion with one another in an online environment. In so doing, I intended to also examine their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of the project, and its possible impact on language usage. The overarching aim of the pilot study was to determine student readiness to engage with others in an online environment.

I established contact with a teacher of English Foreign Language and Intercultural Communication, based at the University of Technology in Troyes<sup>108</sup>, France via the International Exchange for Cross-cultural Communication (IECC) programme. I found her class to be the most suitable in terms of age and level of education. Other projects have been conducted with participants of diverse age groups, however, I wanted to ensure a level of compatibility for this particular project. The instructor

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<sup>108</sup> Please refer to [www.univ-troyes.fr](http://www.univ-troyes.fr)

placed twenty of her EFL students on the programme. They ranged in age from twenty to twenty-five, and came from a variety of cultural backgrounds. The figure that follows reflects their diverse cultural backgrounds:

*Figure 4.4.5: Cultural background of partner students*

<b>Cultural background</b>	<b>Number of students</b>
French	8
Brazilian	6
American	2
Russian	1
Scottish/ Greek	1
Chinese	1
Greek/ Australian	1

Introductory e-mails were drafted and sent by students on both continents. Initially, contact was quite erratic because of technical glitches such as incorrect e-mail addresses. Thereafter they maintained contact on their own over a period of ten to twelve weeks. They corresponded on a variety of themes around culture, language and communication. In order to integrate the project with the syllabus, students were asked to use class topics, such as racism, sexism, culture, language policy, and language attitudes as a basis for discussion. Initially, I asked to be sent copies of their e-mails in order to track the discussion, however, students felt awkward about this (as I did) and I decided to permit them to communicate more freely and rely on their feedback. My students also enjoyed taking digital pictures to send over to their new friends. In the sections that follow I describe the data elicited from the interviews, conversations and student journals. The data is analysed thematically in the following categories: contact established, language issues, perceived improvement in English and ICT proficiency, and benefits and challenges of the project. Finally, I reflect on the pilot project.

#### *4.4.5.1 Maintaining contact*

The majority of the students felt that they were able to maintain contact successfully with their e-pals during the term. Some, such as Thobi, found it difficult to maintain contact because her e-pal did not maintain regular contact. This could be because of language or technical difficulties. Thobi was uncertain, but felt marginalised when her classmates received several messages. She said: “It’s not fair because it’s not your fault when a thing happens like this...not everyone has contact all the time” (Interview, 8 November, 2002).

One way of preventing irregular contact is for the facilitators to intervene and ensure that students maintain regular contact, which should be an objective in the project (refer to Keogh, 2001; Ho, 2000; Sakar, 2001, Mello, 1998; Jor and Mak, 1994). Also, students should have been given more time to communicate with one another before embarking on the cultural project. Students maintained contact at a rate of once a fortnight to four times a week. One way perhaps, of preventing such a discrepancy would be for teachers to stipulate a minimum number of contact sessions, to prevent students from feeling marginalised. Once again, this would depend on the facilitators maintaining common goals. While I was in constant contact with my students regarding the project, I could not maintain regular contact with the teacher in France. She preferred her students to work independently of her input. Thami felt that it was an “eye-opener to be able to talk to a student so far (away)” (Interview, 8 November, 2002).

#### *4.4.5.2 Language issues*

Most students felt that they were able to communicate quite easily with their partners, and that they understood one another, despite their diverse language backgrounds.

Mdu, however, said that he often felt embarrassed because he was “only a second language speaker” (Interview, 8 November, 2002), and that his language was not good enough for the project. Having worked with this particular student for a semester, I did not agree with his view, so perhaps it was a matter of lack of confidence. On another note, Prim felt that she could not understand her e-pal whose English language usage she considered “too weak” (Interview, 7 November, 2002). No doubt, Prim was reassured about her English language usage, supporting the views of Warschauer (1996a) and Kannan and MackNish (2000) that the motivation levels in online communication are high. However, she observed in her diary at one stage “Maybe our English can even get bad if the penpals are not so good” (15 September, 2002).

#### *4.4.5.3 Level of improvement in ICT proficiency and writing skills*

Most students commented that their proficiency with ICT, especially e-mail had improved. Sthembile, for instance, said he felt that the project gave students a reason to practice their ICT skills (November, 2002). They also indicated that their language usage, writing skills and cultural knowledge had improved, as did their ability to communicate with other people, and their classmates and lecturer. Thobi said that she felt she could write more spontaneously, whereas at the beginning of the project she would draft out responses then e-mail them, at the end of the project she e-mailed her e-pal directly (November, 2002). Although not generalisable, responses such as these concur with the view that computer-mediated communication could result in the improvement of writing (Warschauer, Turbee and Roberts, 1996; Brush and Uden, 2000; Karyan and Crowe, 1997 and Harasim, Hilz and Turoff, 1994). Leon, however, said he felt nervous that someone else was reading his work, and that he felt

pressurised to write well. At this point Eva, and Paul, who were interviewed in the same group, felt that pressure was not negative because it could improve writing:

*Leon:* It's like...you know someone is reading it...you must write nicely. There's more pressure on you.

*Eva:* Ja, but this can make you to write better...so it's a good thing to pressure.

*Leon:* But what if there is a mistake...it's a bad impression.

*Paul:* OK, but this is happening in class, like the journals...essays...where is the difference? (Interview, 8 November, 2002).

A limitation is that the project relied on students' views of the perceived improvement in writing skills, as pre- and post-testing was beyond the scope of the pilot project at the time.

#### *4.4.5.4 Perceived benefits and challenges of the pilot project*

Here, the perceived benefits ranged from cultural, language and computer knowledge. Some of the advantages that were reported included that students learnt more about their own culture and the culture of others'. They also felt more confident when communicating. For others, they enjoyed the freedom to contact me and other learners, as this helped them learn, perpetuating the community of practice notion (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Some students felt that the project provided them with a good opportunity to promote South Africa and to eradicate misconceptions about the country. Welcome said, "They know there is someone called Mandela<sup>109</sup>, now they know where he comes from." (Interview, 8 November, 2002). In his diary, Welcome wrote extensively about South Africa and its opportunities. As a language practitioner, he felt he could work with tourists to promote the country. All the participants mentioned that they felt much more comfortable using computers, e-mail and the Net, having participated in the project.

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<sup>109</sup> Former President Nelson Mandela.

However, students were in agreement that computer facilities at Durban Institute of Technology were limited. They also felt that they should be initiated into such work by having formalised lessons on computer literacy, something that the institution was not offering to Humanities students at the time. This would also have improved participation in the web course. This is also a recommendation made by Kannan and MackNish (2000), and one that I think is vital. Students at DIT were expected by the institution to attain computer literacy at their own expense, despite the institution moving towards designing a technology plan, to promote the use of technology in courses. Computers also had to be booked in advance so that students could access e-mail, which slowed down the pace of the project somewhat. Not all of the students managed to progress with the project. Four students did not continue beyond the introductory phase because they experienced difficulty creating e-mail addresses and accessing computers. Dumisani commented that he was at the institution to get his degree and get a job, not to chat with pen pals. He said that he preferred the lecture mode to something more interactive, and found the project too time consuming.

Therefore, while the project appeared to motivate most students, this was not always the case. In the next section I examine student participation in the second online practice of the pilot study, the online web course.

#### *4.4.6 Online component: Language Dynamics Online*

The second component of the pilot project involved the creation of an online course to run parallel to the face-to-face Language Dynamics course. I created an online

component called Language Dynamics Online using the *Nicenet*<sup>110</sup> course management system. The web course was designed to operate from the fifth week of the normal course. Students were given the class key with which to log onto the system. By this time several of the students were experiencing problems sustaining contact with their e-pals. The online course proved to be too technologically sophisticated, as students revealed in several conversations at the time, and only two students were successful in signing up (Zwelakhe and Prim).

I posted summaries of class discussions on the system as well as questions for discussion. Despite encouraging students to participate, they did not take up the offer. Because of the lack of participation, I decided to withdraw the course, rather than cause technological frustration among the students. The students who signed up said that they felt it was a useful system, but as Zwelakhe said “Your computer knowledge must be good and everyone must be keen” (Interview, 8 November, 2002). Mdu, Thami and Bongikile, who did not participate felt that because participation was voluntary it was not sufficient to motivate them to try (Interview, 8 November, 2002). Sbu felt that, at that time, several assignments were due in their other courses, and they were writing tests, so they did not have time to spend on additional input (Interview, 8 November, 2002). An additional occurrence at the time was a one-week student boycott<sup>111</sup> over a financial issue which interrupted our schedule somewhat, and time had to be spent covering up aspects of the formal syllabus which had to be completed by the end of term. In the following section I reflect on the pilot project, and the stimulus it provided for the design of the final project.

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<sup>110</sup> *Nicenet* is explained in detail in Chapter 5.

<sup>111</sup> Student boycotts have been prevalent in South African history, where students protest issues such as financial and political issues by not attending classes. This sometimes results in insufficient time to complete the syllabus when students return to class, and lecturers may make up for this by teaching in their own time.

#### *4.4.7 Facilitator reflection on the pilot study*

With regard to the e-pal component of the course, in retrospect, I made several errors that instructors are cautioned not to make, despite having read widely on similar projects. I embarked on the project without clear assessment goals. I also expected that the student-communication would be unhindered, which was naive, as several students required instructor intervention. Further, I could have prepared students better in terms of computer literacy in a more formalised manner in terms of training. More time should have been spent on technology training, although this was beyond the scope of the syllabus and the heavy workload. This had a negative effect on some of the students who lost interest in the project because they no longer felt motivated, primarily because of computer glitches.

Another limitation of the project is that I did not maintain contact with the EFL teacher and students in France. As a consequence I missed out on the opportunity for reflection on the pros and cons of the project from all the participants involved. For the sake of convenience at the time, the pilot study was only conducted with my students.

With regard to assessment, while the project was integrated with the curriculum in terms of outcomes, for reasons such as loss of contact, I could not include a compulsory assessment task on the project. Students were given choices, of which an assessment task based on the online project was one option. This was to ensure that students who did not proceed to adequate computer competence were not placed at a disadvantage.

In relation to the Language Dynamics Online web course, I think it was too challenging for students who were being introduced to online learning to cope with at the time. If I had focussed on one strategy it would have been sufficient. However, it also motivated me to consider the need to integrate face-to-face and online components to promote a blended approach to my teaching. I also relied on student feedback on issues such as the improvement in English skills, which could not be considered entirely reliable.

However, in terms of the aims of the pilot study, there were several positive findings. Most of the students were able to work effectively with online technology, despite problems experienced with the resources, and the use of technology did contribute to Lave and Wenger's (1991, 1996, 2002) and Rogoff's (2003) notion of a community of practice. Students maintained contact across continents, with one another and with the instructor. Less able students were paired with more computer-literate students who cascaded their computer skills and were quite happy to do so. The students were also happy to extend contact within the classroom by e-mailing queries about tests and assignments, or about what was discussed in class during the week. Often they just sent out an e-mail to greet everyone. The students were also motivated because they were doing something different, which was incorporated into the syllabus. Far more challenging was their lack of participation in the online class. This, I felt would be of more benefit to them pedagogically, to enhance face-to-face classes. Another advantage was that I was able to pilot the instruments, which led to changes in the instruments that were used in the final study at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Students experienced benefits and challenges, and all who completed the project felt that they would like to continue with such work. The task was not without excitement

because the Soccer World Cup was conveniently being played at the time, and some of the students indulged in some inter-continental betting! Phumi's words about the e-pal programme are particularly apt in closing:

It is a great experience corresponding with international e-pals. The only thing about them is they are very stereotyped about Africa. Before, they only think if you live in Africa you must be poor. These people had a bad attitude towards African people. They seem as if they do not even consider or (are) interested in knowing what African countries are really like. This is bad because they do not take time to research Africa. They can learn from us the truth (Interview, 8 November, 2002).

The pilot project influenced the design of my final project to a great extent. While I focussed on the e-pal phase more extensively in the pilot phase, I decided to shift focus to the web course in my final implementation at the University of the Witwatersrand, because I felt that participation in discussion threads would have a far greater impact on student interaction within the class, and that the skills learnt could be transferred to other courses as well. I decided to engage students in e-pal projects as a voluntary initiative, rather than in a formalised manner, so as not to pressurise them. I also decided to include a more formalised training programme.

More important, perhaps, it was no longer sufficient for me to examine how students worked with ICT. I decided to focus more extensively on how participants negotiated meaning in the online environment, as inherent to constructivist learning and communities of practice. This prompted work within a New Literacy Studies framework where I looked at how their ICT practices were historically and socially shaped. I also added focus on how they constructed and positioned themselves in relation to the use of technology in their social worlds. This also necessitated linguistic analysis of participants' postings on discussions threads<sup>112</sup> to conceptualise how they constructed their identities, and whether they perceived themselves to be

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<sup>112</sup> I found the number of messages limited, and an analysis of their interactions lacking in the pilot study.

autonomous in the online environment. Thus, the pilot project had to be modified for the final implementation at the second institution, the University of the Witwatersrand. The next section describes Phases Two and Three, the initiation of OLEP at the final site, the University of the Witwatersrand.

#### **4.5 Phases Two and Three: Final case study at the University of the Witwatersrand**

The University of Witwatersrand is situated on the outskirts of Johannesburg's central business district in Braamfontein, South Africa. The institution originated as the South African School of Mines in Kimberly, in 1896, and became the Transvaal University College when it transferred to Johannesburg in 1904. In 1910 it was renamed the South African School of Mines and Technology. It was granted full university status as the University of the Witwatersrand in 1922 ([www.wits.ac.za](http://www.wits.ac.za), accessed 10 November 2004). Student numbers grew rapidly from 6 275 in 1963 to 10 600 in 1975, and 16 400 by 1985. Since 2000, the University has been undergoing major plans to expand and modernise in terms of physical, academic, and technological infrastructure.

Although the University originally served a white student population, increasingly, black students have been admitted since the onset of democracy in the country in 1994. A substantial number of international students from more than sixty countries, speaking more than seventy different languages, have also been admitted. The University website provides the following demographics:

Figure 4.5: Student demographics at the University of the Witwatersrand

Students and degrees	Numbers
Student headcount (2003)	24 381
International students (2003)	1 300
Black student headcount (1996-2003)	8 185 – 15 820
Number of degrees conferred in 2003	3 946
Number of postgraduate degrees conferred in 2003	1 596

From [www.wits.ac.za](http://www.wits.ac.za) (November 2004).

In its *Mission Statement* ([www.wits.ac.za](http://www.wits.ac.za), November 2004), the University declares that the fundamental role of any university is to promote freedom of enquiry and the search for knowledge and truth. The University therefore sees itself at the industrial and commercial centre for education and research of the highest quality. The *Mission Statement* continues:

Wit's mission is to build on this foundation in a way that takes account of its responsibilities within South Africa today; and to maintain and enhance its position as a leading university in South Africa, in Africa, and in the world by sustaining globally competitive standards of excellence in learning, teaching and research ([www.wits.ac.za](http://www.wits.ac.za), November 2004).

The University is therefore committed to academic freedom and excellence, and playing a leading role in addressing historical disadvantages in the education of students previously disadvantaged by the apartheid era. Included in the purpose statement is to ensure that graduates achieve levels of skills and knowledge that are comparable world-wide, thus, among the University's immediate priorities is to ensure that campuses are well-resourced.

Generally, students register for degrees spanning three years. If their matriculation points do not meet the requirements for university entrance, they may enter *via* a special selection process. If they are successful they are generally accepted over an extended curriculum spanning four years. They are advised on curriculum issues by a curriculum planning unit. Two of the language modules they might be required to study in the Discipline of Applied English Language Studies (AELS) is Foundation in

English: Academic Literacy, and Foundation in English: Language and Research. The discipline AELS, and the two Foundation courses are presented in detail in Chapter 5, where I describe and analyse the data. In the section to follow, I describe the participant sample of the final case study at the University of the Witwatersrand.

#### **4.6 The participant sample: University of the Witwatersrand**

Students who register for the Foundation in English course may do so for one or two semesters<sup>113</sup>. As outlined in Chapter 4, students who do the Foundation in English: Academic Literacy module (hereafter referred to as Academic Literacy) may continue onto Foundation in English: Language and Research (hereafter referred to as Research) in the second semester, or they have the option of doing English or African Literature, or Legal Discourse, if they are Law students. Each week consists of one lecture period, and three tutorial periods. The students meet as a group in the lecture period, where lectures are conducted by staff members. In the remaining periods they attend tutorial groups of about thirty-five students each.

My Academic Literacy tutorial group consisted of thirty-five students in the first semester. At the end of the first semester, seventeen students remained, while eighteen students left to pursue the other courses on offer. In order to make optimal use of staff, the tutorial groups were reorganized so that seventeen new students from another tutorial group joined my group, bringing the total number of students in semester two to thirty-four.

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<sup>113</sup> As a point of interest, the Foundation in English team, of which I was a member, was the recipient of the Faculty of Humanities, as well as the Vice-Chancellor's Team Teaching Awards in the year that this research was conducted (2004).

Of the thirty-four students, twenty volunteered to be part of my research project, however, not all twenty students participated in the online course, OLEP. I have provided character sketches of all twenty participants in order to provide the reader with a more holistic picture<sup>114</sup>. All twenty volunteers were interviewed. In the analysis I use extracts from the interview transcripts and discussion threads to support my discussion. More specific participant demographics in terms of age, gender, nationality and language are described in sections to follow.

The participants ranged in age as follows: six were under twenty, thirteen were in the age group twenty-one to twenty-five, and one was in the age group twenty-six to thirty. There were thirteen males and seven females in the study. All were in their first year of study at the university, however, their choice of degrees varied, as the following figure shows:

*Figure 4.6.1: Sample participants' degrees of study*

<b>Degrees of study</b>	<b>Student number</b>
BA	7
BA Social Work	1
BA Dramatic Arts	1
BA Fine Arts	1
BA Economics	1
B Comm	1
LLB	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>

In terms of the regions participants came from, sixteen were from various regions in South Africa, while four came from SADC or other countries. The figure overleaf elaborates:

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<sup>114</sup> Please refer to Appendix 7 for the character sketches of all participants. Participants' real names are not used to maintain their privacy.

Figure 4.6.2: Participants' regions of origin

South African students		SADC and international students	
KwaZulu Natal	3	Teheran, Iran	1
Limpopo	3	Shanghai, China	1
Giyani	1	Morewa, Zimbabwe	1
North West	1	Maputo, Mozambique	1
Northern Province	2		
Gauteng	3		
South Africa (specific regions not provided)	3		
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>

The intention of this study is not to draw comparisons between local and international students. The reason for including international students is that they all happened to be doing the same course, and are non-mother tongue speakers of English. Their prior use of technology did not influence the results of this study in any way, because none of the international students had used technology in their learning previously. Oscar, Farzana, and Xing had used e-mail previously, while Natalie had had some lessons in computer literacy in school.

All of the South African participants were from disadvantaged backgrounds, having spent most of their formative schooling in under-resourced schools in the rural areas or townships, where they had been learning English from primary school. The students from the SADC regions, as well as China and Iran, had been learning English since high school.

Of the twenty participants, not all used the *Nicenet* system. To prevent misunderstandings around participation, in the following section I present the students who participated in the system, and those who did not. Thirteen participants (65%) were active in the programme, most having been in my class from the first semester. Seven students did not participate in the programme, the majority being new to my class, having joined in the second semester. However, I have included them in the

study in order to present a more composite picture of participants' views on online learning. Once again, the purpose is not intended to be comparative.

*Figure 4.6.3 Student use of Nicenet*

First and second semester (old) students		Second semester (new) students	
Used	Did not use	Used	Did not use
Herman	Natalie	Zinhle	Mabela
Farzana	Sibonelo	Adam	Leonard
Precious	Nothando		Musa
Lucky	Lindiwe		
Xing			
Oscar			
Elsie			
Ernest			
Alex			
Blessing			
Mbali			
<b>11</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>

I describe in Chapter 5 the reasons why certain students participated in the web course, while others did not. In my project, I adopted a range of data collection methods. In the next section, I discuss the methods.

#### **4.7 Data collection methods and techniques**

Having obtained informed consent from participants and the ethics committee at the University<sup>115</sup>, I opted for a triangulated multi-method approach to data collection, which included the use of questionnaires, observations, individual interviews, written data such as electronic literacy histories and postings from discussion threads, and facilitator journals.

<sup>115</sup> The University Ethics Committee requires that research conducted at the university be cleared ethically to ensure that participants' rights are not infringed.

#### 4.7.1 Participant and manager questionnaires

I designed a survey questionnaire<sup>116</sup> to elicit data from the student participants before the intervention began, about their access to, and proficiency with computers, e-mail and the Internet, as well as their views on the use of ICT in the English classroom. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections. The first section was designed to elicit biographical data such as participants' age, home language, gender, and the degrees towards which they were studying. In the second section I asked questions and used Likkert scales to ascertain students' English proficiency, as well as their access and proficiency with ICT. I included questions around how they learnt to use computers and the Internet. Figure 4.7.1.1 from the participant questionnaire illustrates its structure:

Figure 4.7.1.1: Extract 1 from survey questionnaire: English and ICT proficiency

2.1 How would you rate your proficiency (ability) in the following English skills? Please indicate the most suitable response with a cross (X).

	<b>More than adequate</b>	<b>Adequate</b>	<b>Less than adequate</b>	<b>Not adequate</b>
Reading				
Writing				
Speaking				
Listening				

2.4 How would you rate your proficiency (ability) to use the following:

	<b>More than adequate</b>	<b>Adequate</b>	<b>Less than adequate</b>	<b>Not adequate</b>
Computer				
E-mail				
Internet				

<sup>116</sup> Please refer to Appendix 2 for a copy of the survey questionnaire.

A Likkert scale ranging in choice from *strongly agree*, *agree*, *disagree*, *strongly disagree*, to *don't know* was used to ascertain how students thought using the Internet might help them in the English classroom. Here data around the following issues were elicited: reading, writing, listening and speaking skills; vocabulary; pronunciation; intercultural communication; and communication with the teacher and other learners.

Open-ended questions on the questionnaire gave students an opportunity to explain how they learnt to use computers and the Internet. The final question was also open-ended and asked for reasons why they would or would not like to use the Internet in the English classroom.

Cohen *et al* (2000), Leedy (1997) and Peterson (2000), advise against the common pitfalls such as overly long questionnaires, confusing instructions, complicated design and ambiguous questions. Thus my questionnaire which served to capture data from the thirty-four students in the first semester at the University of the Witwatersrand, and seventeen new students in the second semester, was designed to accommodate the linguistic needs of English non-mother tongue speakers in a simple and accessible format, as shown in Figure 4.7.1.2:

Figure 4.7.1.2: Extract from survey questionnaire: Computer and Internet access

2.2 Do you have regular access to a computer?

	Yes	No
Where you live		
At your institution		

2.3 Do you have regular access to the Internet?

	Yes	No
Where you live		
At your institution		

In addition to student questionnaires, two School Managers were asked to fill in questionnaires in order to establish a broader view of ICT use in the Faculty of Humanities and in the School of Literature and Language Studies, namely the Head of School, and the Head of Information Technology for the Humanities<sup>117</sup>. Open-ended questions addressed the following issues:

- ICT-policy and technology planning at the University,
- the incorporation of technology in the Humanities classroom,
- the extent to which online learning was being implemented at the University,
- responses of staff members and students to the use of ICT in teaching and learning,
- their perceptions of the possible benefits and challenges of online learning,
- ICT facilities in the School for staff and students,
- staff and student training, and
- the role of online learning within the School, and in particular, in the teaching and learning of English.

#### 4.7.2 Observations

The purpose of the observation, one of the typical methods adopted in the case study, is to probe and analyse phenomena, with a view to establishing generalisations about the wider population that the unit belongs to (Cohen *et al*, 2000; Sarantakos, 1998). Observation methods are beneficial on several accounts: non-verbal behaviour may be observed and commented on, a feature that may be overlooked in other methods such as questionnaires. The description of ongoing behaviour as it unfolds is also enabled through observations.

Vital to observations is the role played by the observer, namely, the observer as participant and non-participant. As course facilitator, I played the role of participant observer when students went to the computer laboratory. The predicament here could be the issue of bias and subjectivity. As a member of the class group, I had to be conscious of the fact while I could assist students if they needed help logging on, I

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<sup>117</sup>Please refer to Appendix 3 for a copy of the questionnaire designed to elicit data from the School Managers.

was not there to teach them during observation sessions, but to observe their ICT practices. Thus I tried not to interfere in their practices. Non-participant observers on the other hand, remain distant from the goings on of the unit, and do not become members of the group. I also tried to ensure validity by taking cognisance of criteria established by Bless and Higson-Smith (1995) and Sarantakos (1998): that observations be systematically and objectively planned, controlled and recorded, using pre-determined categories. Thus, where necessary, many observers should be able to record the same phenomena or events. I used an observation schedule as a guide for the sessions I observed, and the specific features I was interested in researching<sup>118</sup>.

Because the observation write-up may be prone to vague descriptions and inconsistent categorisations, which does not contribute to reliability and validity, the use of an observation schedule helped me prevent imprecision in terms of data collected. The schedule helped me categorise participant behaviour, thus contributing to reliability and validity in the process. The systematic coding methods I opted to use, and which I decided on before I started observing participants, enabled me to record particulars of what I was looking for, and the types of events I was interested in. As Stangor (1998: 122) explains:

Specificity about the behaviours of interest has the advantage of both focusing the observers' attention on these specific behaviours and reducing the masses of data that might be collected if the observers attempted to record everything they saw.

I made provision for observations of the computer laboratory being used, and allowed for field notes including the following:

- laboratory layout, notices, the number of computers, the number of working computers,

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<sup>118</sup> Please refer to Appendix 4 for a copy of the Observation Schedule, and Appendix 5 for a sketch of the layout of the Humanities computer laboratory.

- the number of students in the laboratory, in queues to use computers, and the number working per computer,
- students' ability to get connected to the Net, and to the Nicenet class if that was the purpose of their visit,
- independent, pair or group work,
- requests for assistance, and from whom.

Observations should not be considered fault-free, and I was aware of some of the problems associated with observations. Among these are that I had to be vigilant enough to observe all that was occurring. This is not always possible as classroom dynamics operate on several layers. To me, one of the major problems is that one can only observe the observable – what appears on the surface. In order to examine in detail, it is necessary to make inferences, which may not be valid. Therefore, I triangulated the data gathering process with additional methods such as interviews. Audio-recording the observations might have allowed me to enable a more accurate picture to emerge, however, I needed to observe participants' practices at the computers, not just their conversations during laboratory sessions, which would not have been possible with audio recordings. An option would be video-recording, but even this is not without bias if one needs to focus on all students equitably, however, an additional problem was that the participants went to the laboratory in their own time, when other students were busy on the computers, and I could not guarantee ethical clearance if I recorded students who were not part of the study. Because the laboratory was a general Faculty of Humanities laboratory, I had to make arrangements with students about when they would be working with the computers so that I could observe them in small groups or individually.

The observation as a research method is open to subjectivity on the part of the researcher, and, as already stated, in order to circumvent subjectivity, I adopted a triangulated approach that included other instruments such as questionnaires,

interviews, written data and facilitator journals. In all, I observed six computer laboratory sessions during semester one, and six in semester two, ranging from one to two hours per session. I arranged for participants to inform me when they were going to the laboratory, so that I was able to observe about 75% of the participants working on computers at least once.

#### 4.7.3 Interviews

Interviews are productive in terms of gathering data for case studies as they focus directly on the case study topic. Individual semi-structured interviews<sup>119</sup> were held with twenty students towards the end of the project. I was conscious of Kvale's view (in Cohen *et al*, 2000), that the interview marks a move away from seeing human subjects as manipulable, and towards regarding knowledge as generated between humans through conversation. Thus, interviews emphasise the social context of research data. I was equally conscious of Yin's (1994) caution that the interview as a means of gathering data is time-consuming, in danger of bias, and subjective, while still being capable of yielding rich material.

Interviewing is more than just asking questions. Leedy (1997), Cohen *et al* (2000), Sarantakos (1998) and Nunan (1992) distinguish between structured, unstructured and semi-structured interviews. The structured interview, to what Cohen *et al* (2000: 27) refer as the closed quantitative interview, utilises a schedule of questions and is much like a questionnaire. All interviewees are asked the same questions in the same order, leaving no room for probing. A strength is that it is relatively easy to analyse, but may come across as mechanistic and impersonal. The unstructured interview, referred to as the informal conversational interview (Cohen *et al*, 2000) is very open, but may

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<sup>119</sup> Please refer to Appendix 6 for a copy of the student interview schedule.

perhaps lack in direction and focus. The questions emerge during the course of the interview, which may add to the relevance of the questions, but on the other hand, may be seen as less systematic if different information is collected from different respondents. Because of the aforementioned characteristics, I felt more comfortable using semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview relies on a basic interview guide, which may be expanded on during the course of the interview. Interviewers are also not bound by the order of the questions. Therefore, I found the flexibility offered by the semi-structured interview attractive.

Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed in order to ensure accuracy. Interviewees were given copies of transcriptions to comment on 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 could also distract or hamper certain interviewees. It is inevitable too that transcription loses data from the original encounter. Cohen *et al* (2000: 282) refer to the problem as follows:

Transcriptions are decontextualised, abstracted from time and space, from the dynamics of the situation, from the live form, and from the social, interactive, dynamic, and fluid dimensions of their sources; they are frozen.

Furthermore, non-verbal body language, which may add richly to meaning and are therefore important in an interview, will also be omitted in transcription. Thus I noted relevant non-verbal gestures during interviews where necessary. The advantage of audio-recording, however, is that I was not hampered by making extensive notes during the interview.

In relation to content, the interview schedule consisted of three main sections, namely, biographical details, Net-based practices, and learner autonomy. Students were asked

as a triangulation of the questionnaire discussed earlier, about their access, proficiency prior to and after the implementation of the project, as well as their Net-practices such as frequency in logging on and sites accessed. Figure 4.7.3.1 illustrates some of the interview questions:

Figure 4.7.3.1: Extract from the student interview schedule (Please refer to Appendix 6 for the full interview schedule)

<b>Section 2: ICT-practice, proficiency and access (extract)</b>	
2.1	Did you have access to computers and the Internet at high school? _____ _____
2.2	Do you have regular access to a computer 2.2.1. Where you live? _____ 2.2.2 At your institution? _____
2.3	Do you have regular access to the Internet? 2.3.1 Where you live: _____ 2.3.2 At your institution: _____
2.6	How often do you log on to the Internet? 2.6.1 For class use? _____ 2.6.2 For personal use? _____
2.7	For what purposes do you log on, and what types of sites do you generally visit? _____ _____
<b>Section 3: Internet-based classroom and English practices (extract)</b>	
3.1	Have you enjoyed using the online class? Why? _____ _____
3.2	Are you using computers and the Internet in any of your other courses? _____
3.3	Do you think there are advantages to using computers and the Internet in class? If so, what are they? _____ _____
3.4	Do you think there are disadvantages to using computers and the Internet in class? If so, what are they? _____ _____

In the section on learner autonomy, students were asked questions emanating from Guglielmino's (1977, 1997) Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS), as presented in Chapter 3. I bore in mind Cohen and colleagues' (2000) caution that rating scales cannot always generate degrees of sensitivity and subtlety of data, and therefore opted not to use the scale *per se*, but to interview students around key items

in the scale. As discussed in Chapter 3, it is not possible to quantify self-direction in learners, but, it is possible to measure learners' propensity for self-direction, one such tool being the SDLRS. The 58-item Likkert scale was designed to measure the degree to which people perceive themselves as having the skills and attitudes typically associated with self-directed learning. Having obtained the rating scale from the Guglielmino Foundation in Florida, United States, I adapted the interview questions to suit my study in online environments, and asked questions around the following characteristics in relation to their general learning habits, as well as in relation to their use of online practices:

- Preference for working alone or in groups,
- Enjoyment of, and curiosity about learning,
- Teacher-guidance,
- Ability to develop ideas,
- Challenges in learning,
- Formulation of learning goals,
- Location of resources,
- Learning strategies,
- Retention,
- Critical thinking,
- Evaluation of progress,
- Relation to prior knowledge,
- Persistence in learning,
- Time management.

#### *4.7.4 Written data from participants and the researcher*

I wished to elicit rich data from students around their thoughts and feelings about their early encounters with electronic literacy, in particular ICT literacy practices and thus I decided to borrow from the literacy history method of eliciting data, by asking participants to write literacy histories around their electronic literacy practices, which I called electronic literacy histories. An electronic literacy history is an autobiographical account of participants' early encounters with ICT, and provided valuable input on their feelings and perceptions of electronic literacy practices. Especially significant was the detail they provided on their feelings of

disempowerment, not being proficient in the use of ICT, as well as how they positioned themselves in relation to ICT.

The second type of written data was messages posted to discussion threads in the online class. In order to analyse participant-identities as constructed in online environments, I found it necessary to refer to my own, as well as participants' extracts from the discussion threads. I posted a question around course readings each week, and participants were asked to respond to the issues and discussions that emanated. I conduct a discourse analysis of some of the postings or written data in relation to language use and the construction of identity<sup>120</sup>.

#### 4.7.5 *Facilitator journal and journalistic notes*

Zeichner and Liston say that the teacher who engages in reflection is one who:

examines, frames and attempts to solve dilemmas of classroom practice; is aware of and questions the assumptions and values he or she brings to teaching; is attentive to the institutional and cultural contexts in which he or she teaches; takes part in curriculum development and is involved in school change efforts; takes responsibility for his or her own professional development (in Reed, 2002:38).

I kept a journal over the year the research was conducted, in which I recorded my thoughts on the project, as well as notes on relevant informal conversations with participants who 'popped in' to visit with queries, or if we happened to meet around campus. I found the informal conversations very helpful, but needed a more formalised way of recording them, which the journal provided. I also used the journal in which to reflect on the project as it unfolded, and it helped me modify some of my strategies as the course progressed. Essentially, the journal helped me grow personally, as well as professionally.

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<sup>120</sup> This information was descriptive in nature and is available on request.

I was aware that the use of journals has been critiqued for their subjectivity and bias (Walker, 1985). However, Holly (1987) says that journals give value to the self in research. Nias (1993) agrees that journals add value because they are a rich source of data and are useful when used in conjunction with other methods such as observations and interviews. Having described the methods of data collection, Figure 4.7.6 summarises these for the reader.

Figure 4.7.6: Matrix of data collection and analytical methods

Method	Participants	Instrument	Analysis	Communities of practice
Survey	34 students	Questionnaire	Statistical and thematic: Biographical and background details.	
	2 School Managers	Questionnaire and conversations	Thematic: Access and policy issues within SLLS.	
Observations	Six groups in Semester One Six groups in Semester Two	Observation schedule	Thematic: Identity (Hall, Norton, Castells). Self-directed learning from the Self-directed learning Readiness Scale.	
Interviews	20 students	Interview schedule	Thematic Framework: Identity (Hall, Norton, Castells). Self directed learning from the Self-directed Learning Readiness Scale.	
Written data	20 students	Electronic literacy histories	Thematic Framework: Electronic (ICT)-literacy as social practice (Gee, Street, Knobel and Lankshear).	
		Extracts from discussion threads	Framework: Identity (Hall, Norton, Castells).	
Facilitator journal and journalistic notes	Facilitator	Journal Observation schedules	Thematic: Identity (Hall, Norton, Castells). Self-directed learning from the Self-directed learning Readiness Scale.	

Figure 4.7.6 above indicates that the themes selected for analysis transcend across all the data collection methods, making it possible to cross-check findings from one particular method with another. The intention is also that responses relating to questions around identity-construction, participation, relationships, and autonomy will

underpin and form the basis for answering my primary research question on the extent to which communities of practice are enabled in online environments.

#### **4.8 Reflections**

In this chapter I presented two projects, the pilot and the main project, by discussing the case study as my research approach. I presented the timeline for the project as a flow chart consisting of five phases. The first three phases are described in this chapter, namely the pilot study and the planning and implementation of OLEP<sup>121</sup>. I also describe how I gained access to the pilot and final sites and participants. The multimethod approach to collecting data in the study is also described with a view to securing, as far as possible, the reliability and validity of data, methodology, instrument design and participant sample. Further, results of the pilot study were presented, and the implications for the final case study were discussed.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 present the reader with a thematic analysis of data collected from the range of instruments described in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, I present participants' ICT-practice, in- and out-of the university, in relation to themes such as access and proficiency, using the work of Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic (2000), Gee (1996, 1997, 2000), Street (1984, 1993, 1998, 2003), and Lankshear and Knobel (1997, 2004) as a framework for literacy as a social practice. Chapter 6 raises issues of negotiation, participation and identity in online environments, while Chapter 7 provides an analysis of perceptions of autonomy as established from Guglielmino's (1977, 1997) work with the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale.

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<sup>121</sup> Phases Four and Five are presented in the data analysis and concluding Chapters respectively.

## **PART III:**

### **Electronic literacy, identity, and autonomy**

## CHAPTER 5

### **Electronic (ICT)-literacy as a social practice: Issues of ICT-access, proficiency, and practice**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter I presented the research design of my project as a five-phase intervention. I described Phase One, the pilot study, and its implications for the final Online English Project (OLEP), (Phases Two and Three).

In order to explore the research questions, the data description and analysis section of this study, or Phase Four, comprises three chapters, to handle three specific areas that enable me to explore the extent to which participants engage in online communities. The first area I examine is their electronic literacy practices, with specific focus on ICT-literacy. Second, I look at their online interactions and construction of identities, and third, I look at the extent to which they perceive ICT enables them to be autonomous. Thus, each data analysis chapter is designed to address specific research questions. In Chapter 5 the question concerning the electronic (ICT) literacy practices of higher education English non-mother tongue speakers, and how these practices shape their perceptions of ICT use in an English language classroom, is addressed. I draw primarily on the work of Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic (2000), Street (1984, 1993, 1998, 2003), and Gee (1996, 1997, 2000), described in Chapter 3, who suggest that the conventional view of 'literacy' is narrow, and that literacy is not a skill, but a social practice that is embedded in broader social goals. They say further that different literacies are associated with different domains of life, and that literacy practices are patterned by power relationships and social institutions. Literacy is also historically situated, and the practices change, in particular, in this case, with the introduction of new electronic technologies into the teaching-learning environment.

In this chapter, I first describe the context of the School of Literature and Language Studies (SLLS), the discipline, Applied English Language Studies (AELS), and the Foundation in English courses. I describe the technological provisions within the school and discipline, to provide a context for the use of ICT across the School. Thereafter the *Nicenet* online component is described. At this point participants' in- and out-of-school ICT-literacy practices in terms of ICT access in learners' former high schools, homes, and at the university is explored. I then examine learners' ICT-literacy practices in relation to their proficiency, and how they learnt to use the media. The next section examines learners' Internet and online (*Nicenet*)-literacy practices in relation to frequency of access, the types of sites they visit and their views on the benefits and challenges of the use of ICT. I conclude the chapter with personal reflections on participants' ICT-literacy practices.

In Chapter 6, I present a thematic analysis of the data in relation to Lave and Wenger's (1991, 1996, 2002) concept 'communities of practice', in order to establish the extent to which participants engage in communities of practice. I establish the extent to which they participate, negotiate meaning and develop and sustain relationships in online communities. This is in response to the second research question, "What relationships do the participants develop in online environments?" Participants' interaction is examined in relation to Lave and Wenger's (1991, 1996, 2002) concept 'legitimate peripheral participation', where participants initially engage as novices, or 'new comers' and are assisted by more proficient participants, or 'old timers' in order to participate fully within the community of practice. Then I examine how participants construct their identities textually, and in relation to broader social issues, in response to the third research question, "How do participants construct their

identities in online environments?” This examination is based on the work of Hall (1992), Norton (Pierce) (1995, 1997, 2000) and Ivanic (1998). Data texts from discussion forums are used as the basis for analysis.

Chapter 7 deploys Guglielmino’s (1977, 1997) characteristics of self-directed learning, or learner autonomy as a framework for analyzing the extent to which participants perceive themselves to be self-directed in the online environment. This chapter responds to the fourth research question, “To what extent do participants perceive themselves autonomous in online environments?” and utilizes data from the interview responses.

The analysis of students’ electronic literacy practices, relationships, participation, negotiation of meaning, and their construction of identities and autonomy should provide a framework for understanding my primary research question on the extent to which communities of practice are enabled in online environments, given that the characteristics are key elements of communities of practice. Within the proposed frameworks, I analyse the data thematically, as explained by Aronson (1994) in the section that follows.

## **5.2 About thematic analysis**

Although thematic analysis is most often used in ethnographic studies<sup>122</sup>, I found aspects of such an approach appropriate for the analysis of data gathered for this thesis. In her description of the pragmatic procedures involved in thematic analysis,

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<sup>122</sup> Refer, for instance to Norton’s (1995, 1997, 2000) studies of language and identity among immigrant women in Canada, Brice-Heath’s (1983) work with children’s language use in two communities in the United States, and McKinney’s (2003) work on creating constructively critical citizens in an English course in South Africa.

Aronson (1994) says that such an analysis focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of living and behaviour. She advises listing patterns of experiences within transcribed conversations, which may take the form of direct quotes or paraphrasing. The data may be related to already classified patterns. This structure I adopt within the patterns identified in communities of practice and self-directed learning. Within these patterns I combine and code related themes and sub-themes. Leininger (1985:60)<sup>123</sup> suggests that themes are identified by “bringing together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone”. Seen from this perspective, a narrative emerges on participants’ ICT-literacy practices, their access and proficiency with ICT, their participation in communities, and the extent to which they consider themselves autonomous in online environments. In the following section, I present the background of the School of Literature and Language Studies, the discipline, Applied English Language Studies, and the Foundation in English courses, on which my study is based.

### **5.3 About the School (SLLS), the Discipline (AELS), and Foundation in English at the University of the Witwatersrand**

The School of Literature and Language Studies (SLLS) is located within the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). The School is organized in Disciplines which offer a range of courses and programmes, including African Languages, African Literature, Applied English Language Studies, Classics, English Studies, French, German, Portuguese, Spanish, IT for the Humanities, Italian, Linguistics, Media Studies, Publishing Studies, and South African Sign Language.

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<sup>123</sup> Cited in Aronson (1994).

My enquiry covered two Foundation in English classes over one year (2004) within the discipline Applied English Language Studies (AELS). I considered Applied English a suitable choice for a language-based course because of its concern with the study of English language as a social practice in multilingual contexts (<http://slls.uiply.co.za/>, accessed 3 December 2004). The discipline functions at the interface between language, literacy and the social context, and academics within this area are interested in the origins of language practices in English, their social effects and implications for intercultural communication. The discipline offers students undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in the field of English Language Studies.

Both Foundation courses address academic literacy and served as the basis for my study. Foundation in English: Academic Literacy<sup>124</sup> focuses on language in a sociocultural context. The skills and practice focus is writing in specific genres such as autobiographical or narrative writing, comparisons and contrasts, and arguments, as well as oral skills. The content basis is established through particular themes such as the transition from school to university, HIV/AIDS, polygamy and gender issues. Students are provided with a range of interesting and provocative readings as core material. Over the course of the semester skills are scaffolded, or presented at levels of increasing complexity. The course structure includes formal lectures of forty-five minutes once a week, and smaller group tutorials of forty-five minutes each four times a week. Students are given the option to attend an academic development tutorial every week where academic literacy skills may be developed more extensively. Students may also make appointments with lecturers and tutors for private consultations. Students are assessed formatively and summatively in oral and written contexts, and are given the opportunity to rewrite essays based on self, peer and tutor

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<sup>124</sup> Please refer to Appendix 8 for the course outline.

feedback. Comprehensive assessment criteria are used. Written and oral feedback is provided formally and informally.

The second semester module, *Foundation in English: Language and Research*<sup>125</sup> has a strong research focus, unlike the *Academic Literacy* course offered in the first semester. As explained in Chapter 4, students have options with regard to courses they could choose to study in the second semester: *Language and Research*, *Literature*, *African Literature*, or *Legal Discourse* (the latter in the case of Law students). For this reason, there is generally a re-organisation of students into tutorial groups, that is, students do not necessarily remain within the same class groups in the second semester.

Students work in groups to conduct research on language issues over the course of the fourteen-week period, and compile a research report, which they present in written and oral form. They attend formal lectures on different aspects of research, and simultaneously start their projects in tutorials. Research articles on various language issues such as language policy, naming practices, language varieties, language attitudes, and translation and interpreting are also discussed in tutorials. Students select their own research groups and produce a research topic, questions, methodology, and instruments. They collect data within the prescribed period, analyse the data, and present their findings orally to the tutorial group, and then in a written report.

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<sup>125</sup> Please refer to Appendix 9 for the course outline.

Having described the Foundation courses, in the next section I present an overview of the current technological landscape of SLLS. This is done in order to provide contextual detail on issues such as technology planning and policy, as well as staff access to, and use of ICT in teaching and learning. These issues are important because, for staff members to utilize ICT effectively in their teaching practice, it needs to be supported at university-wide level. Furthermore, to overcome teacher under-preparedness and fear (as referred to by Snyder, 2002), staff members require suitable access to ICT, and to be professionally trained in its use as a teaching tool<sup>126</sup>. Additional views on the incorporation of ICT into Humanities syllabi are elicited from two School managers, namely the Head of School, Professor Tawana Kupe, and the Head of IT for the Humanities, Dinesh Balliah.

## **5.4 The technological landscape in SLLS**

### *5.4.1 Technology planning*

The intention to integrate technology into teaching and learning at an institution is usually located within its technology plan or policy<sup>127</sup>. Such a plan or policy may drive the use of technology across the university. The ‘*Statement of Purpose*’ in the *University Mission Statement* states its intention “to ensure that its graduates achieve levels of skill, knowledge and understanding comparable with those graduates of the best universities worldwide”<sup>128</sup>. Also included among the priorities set out in the Mission Statement is that the University be well-resourced. Despite searching the university website, and making enquiries through several relevant departments at the time of this study, it was established that a technology plan does not exist at the

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<sup>126</sup> At school level, the Draft White Paper on e-Education (2004) recommends that all teachers be professionally developed in the use of ICT pedagogy. However, this is not a requirement in higher education. Czerniewicz’s (2004) discussion is also relevant.

<sup>127</sup> Refer, for example to the University of Pretoria’s Technology Plan (Cronje, 1997b).

<sup>128</sup> Available on [www.wits.ac.za/depts/wcs/mission.shtml](http://www.wits.ac.za/depts/wcs/mission.shtml). Accessed 1 September 2004.

institution. However, the *Strategic Plan* (1999) states that, in order to achieve its vision, the University of the Witwatersrand can “become fully connected for the global era, with enhanced information technology and enhanced international links” (*Strategic Plan*, 1999)<sup>129</sup>. According to Balliah, (October, 2004), the Faculty and University “computing” committees of which she is a member were never able to articulate a concrete policy that was agreeable to all parties. However, both Kupe and Balliah saw the need to incorporate technology in Humanities classrooms for the following reasons:

The Humanities are no longer just paper based disciplines or areas of study. Quite a lot can be done using computers and on the Internet to assist with writing, research and creative work (Kupe, 25.10.2004).

...because more and more research resources are being digitally distributed and information literacy is becoming more vital to successful research (Balliah, 20.10.2004).

Although the integration of technology into teaching and learning does not appear to have been planned at the university, staff and students do have access to technology. The following section expands on staff access and their use of technology in their curricula and teaching practice.

#### 5.4.2 *Staff and student access to ICT in SLLS*

As stated earlier in this chapter, staff access to, and proficiency in ICT, are important in overcoming teacher under-preparedness for the incorporation of ICT in their teaching. In SLLS at present, most staff members have personal computers and printers. All staff members have Internet access. Students in SLLS have access to one teaching laboratory in the School, with forty workstations, a stand-alone server, and one heavy-duty printer. This laboratory has a foldaway partition, so that when the laboratory is needed as a teaching laboratory, it might be divided into two venues with

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<sup>129</sup> Available on [www.intranet.wits.ac.za:88/wcs/strategicplan/strat.html](http://www.intranet.wits.ac.za:88/wcs/strategicplan/strat.html) Accessed 9 November 2004).

twenty workstations each, where one section is used to teach in, and the other may be used by students for their own purposes. This partition, however, does not eliminate noise or interference from each section<sup>130</sup>. All students have Internet access in the laboratory. Students also have access to other computer laboratories on campus, such as in the main library, which are similarly equipped.

#### *5.4.3 Using technology in teaching and learning*

At present, technology has been incorporated into very few courses in SLLS, specifically, it has only been introduced in Media Studies, Modern Languages and AELS. One such course, Internet Literacies<sup>131</sup> is a second year Applied English module. In this course students learn about the ways in which computer technology is changing language, literacy, and communication. Students apply their understanding of technology and cyber culture to projects that may involve authoring web pages and designing web sites (AELS Pamphlet, 2004).

Currently, the use of technology in teaching and learning is not the norm in the SLLS. One of the reasons suggested by Balliah (20. 10. 2004) for the limited extent to which online learning is being undertaken within SLLS, is the lack of central budget. There are also challenges in terms of staff training. Academic staff members are not formally trained to use technology in their teaching and learning, unless they choose to attend selected training courses. Students also do not receive formal training, although, in courses where technology is utilized students could benefit from “the modernized skill in knowledge acquisition” (Balliah, 20.10.2004). Balliah added “the general view in the Human Sciences is that such learning should be reserved for

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<sup>130</sup> Please refer to Appendix 5 for a plan of the layout of the Humanities laboratory in which I did all my observations.

<sup>131</sup> Internet Literacies is a course I co-ordinated and taught in 2005.

postgraduate students who work on their own. Staff members are also reluctant to interact with the technology which is what is needed for a successful implementation of technology-enhanced learning at an undergraduate level” (20.10.2004). It is the view of both Managers that students could benefit from the implementation of online learning. Students would benefit by being empowered to use technology for various purposes, as well as have access to wider research resources. Staff too would benefit from modernized, innovative course delivery. However, one of the challenges associated with implementing technology in the classroom remains the need to constantly upgrade equipment to keep up with changes, about which Balliah felt “what is worse than not implementing technology-enhanced learning, is the use of outdated technology” (20.10.2004).

My study is therefore located against a backdrop where the use of ICT in teaching and learning is not the norm. The next section describes the online component, which I designed and run parallel to the face-to-face Foundation class, using the Nicenet system. Thereafter an overview of the participant sample is presented, as well as their access, proficiency, and views on ICT.

### **5.5 Online English Project: The *Nicenet* online component**

OLEP involved the design of an online intervention, using the *Nicenet* web course management system, to run parallel to the face-to-face tutorials. As explained in the section on web course management systems in Chapter 2, *Nicenet* is a free web course management tool that provides users with the following basic facilities:

- conferencing page where participants may engage in discussion
- link sharing, where other relevant sites may be loaded
- documents page where documents may be uploaded
- class schedule, where timetables and course outlines may be uploaded
- list of class members

- personal messages, where participants may access messages sent to them.

Other web course management systems such as *Blackboard* could have been used, but, the download time in South Africa is much slower than *Nicenet*. *WebCT*, another popular system, to which the University is licensed, was a little too sophisticated, in my view, to use with my undergraduate students who had little previous experience with ICT. Although I had done training courses in all three systems, I found *Nicenet* most suitable for my purposes, the only facility lacking being chat rooms. However, as my research did not involve the use of chat rooms, this did not matter at the time.

Figure 5.5.1 that follows is a screenshot of a typical first page of a *Nicenet* class:

Figure 5.5.1: Typical Nicenet first page

Nicenet's Internet Classroom Assistant

**NEW ICA USERS**

[Join a Class](#)      [Create a Class](#)      [Learn More](#)

**CURRENT ICA USERS**

**Username:**       **Password:**

[\[Forgot Your Password?\]](#)

**REAL-TIME ICA TRAFFIC REPORT**

How many people have used their account?

- In the last 10 minutes: 19
- In the last 24 hours: 3,440
- In the last week: 11,568
- Since January, 1998: 186,730

We are working to [raise funds](#) for another server to help bear the load

---

[\[Learn More About the ICA | Set up your class right now.\]](#)

The Foundation in English participants were given a detailed Handout with instructions on how to join the class<sup>132</sup>. I also assisted students who experienced difficulty signing on. Figure 5.5.2 is a screenshot of the home page of the Foundation class:

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<sup>132</sup> Please refer to Appendix 10 for the Handout, which might be useful in order to see that instructions were simplified for English non-mother tongue students with minimal previous use of ICT.

Figure 5.5.2: Home page of the Foundation class

User name

  
  
 Leila Kajee

## Internet Classroom Assistant

Friday, March 26, 2004 6:27AM CST

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Foundation 124/6

[Conferencing](#)

[Link Sharing](#)

[Documents](#)

[Class Schedule](#)

[Class Members](#)

---

**Personal Messages :**  
[View](#) | [Send](#)

---

**Classes :**  
[Join](#) | [Create](#) | [Drop](#) | [Delete](#)

[Class Administration](#)

[Edit User Profile](#)

[ICA FAQ](#)

---

PROTECT YOUR PRIVACY:  
[LOG OUT](#)

### Home – Foundation124

---

**Since you last logged in on Friday, March 02 :**

- No new personal messages have been sent to you.  
[\[View Messages\]](#) | [Send a Message](#)

**Conferencing**

- No new comments have been posted under any topics.  
[\[View Topics\]](#) | [New Topic](#) | [New Message](#)

**Link Sharing**

- No new links have been posted.  
[\[View Links\]](#) | [New Link](#)

---

**WEEK AT A GLANCE**  
[\[View Schedule\]](#)

---

[LOGOUT](#)

In the next figure, Figure 5.5.3, I provide a sample conferencing page so that readers can refer to some of the conferencing topics around which students engaged in discussion. Topics were linked to class discussions around readings and assignments. The comment appearing in brackets after each question is an indication of the number of messages posted by participants at that particular point<sup>133</sup>.

<sup>133</sup> Extracts of discussions are included in the data analysis.

Figure 5.5.3 Sample conferencing page

**NICENET** **Internet Classroom Assistant**

Leila Kajee Tuesday, June 29, 2004 4:37AM CST

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Foundation 124/6

[Home](#)

[Conferencing](#)

[Link Sharing](#)

[Documents](#)

[Class Schedule](#)

[Class Members](#)

---

**Personal Messages :**  
[View](#) | [Send](#)

**Classes :**  
[Join](#) | [Create](#) | [Drop](#) | [Delete](#)

[Class Administration](#)

[Edit User Profile](#)

[ICA FAQ](#)

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Enter New Class:  
Foundation 124/6

[Change Class](#)

Bottom of Form

Conferencing Topics

[ [Add New Topic](#) | [Post New Message](#) ]

View All Topics

**All Topics :**

- **What do you think of polygamy? Does it work in South Africa?** (3 messages posted )  
updated 05/27/04  
[\[post\]](#) | [\[edit\]](#) | [\[delete\]](#)
- **Murray reading** – Is polygamy supported by South African law? (4 messages posted)  
updated 04/22/04  
[\[post\]](#) | [\[edit\]](#) | [\[delete\]](#)
- **HIV/AIDS** – To what extent does gender play a role in HIV/AIDS? (5 messages posted)  
updated 04/16/04  
[\[post\]](#) | [\[edit\]](#) | [\[delete\]](#)
- **Argument reading** (1 message posted)  
[\[post\]](#) | [\[edit\]](#) | [\[delete\]](#)
- **Would you be involved in a polygamous marriage?** (4 messages posted)

As is evident from Figure 5.5.1, teachers may create new classes, each of which would require a new class key. Users may join any existing class to which they are given the key, by using a user name and password. *Nicenet* offers conferencing links, where teachers and students may engage in asynchronous discussions. Link sharing allows for the teacher, as well as students to post suitable useful links such as other

articles or web sites. I also included the e-pal link. I received a posting on the TESL listserv from a teacher in China, who was interested in his students communicating with English-speaking students, and sharing cultural experiences. This will be discussed in more detail in the section on global e-pal communities in Chapter 6, which examines communities of practice in detail.

The documents link allowed me to post documents such as model essays for students to read. I also included hints on writing the examination, such as examination preparation, study techniques, and time management. The section 'Class Members' enables all participants to see who had joined the class, as well as to get other members' contact details. I found the link useful to ascertain which students were registered for the class at any particular point in the study.

Having described the *Nicenet* class, in the section that follows I examine participants' ICT access and proficiency, as well as their views on the use of ICT in teaching and learning, in relation to constructs of the digital divide.

## **5.6 ICT-literacy practice: Living the digital divide**

Drawing on Warschauer's (2002a; 2002b; 2003) and Feenberg's (1991) views, as presented earlier in this thesis, the digital divide should not be considered a bipolar division between 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Rather, it is about political, economic, institutional, cultural, and linguistic issues of class and power. I was conscious of the social presence of my participants, that is, who they are, and where they come from, also bearing in mind that providing them with ways of utilising technology was not just a means of providing them with access, but a means of social inclusion and mobility. Hence, my focus in this section on ICT-practice is not just to highlight the

presence or absence of ICT, but serves to draw attention to issues of electronic literacy practice, social development, and inclusion and exclusion, in Warschauer's words: "an overemphasis on the mere presence of computers or Internet connections, without corresponding emphasis on social mobilization and transformation, can squander resources while leaving inequity intact" (2003b:303).

In fact several participants in my study commented on the marginalisation and lack of power they felt on entering university from disadvantaged backgrounds, because of their lack of access to technology. In their view other students, usually Indian and white students, had previous access to ICT at home or in school. They regarded this as being compliant with historical issues of race and politics in South Africa. Thus, the view is consistent with Gee's (2000) reference to social practices being studied within social, cultural, historical, political and economic contexts. Street (2003) also says that research requires language and literacy to be studied as they occur naturally in social life, taking into account context and their different meanings for different cultural groups. Considering South Africa's past, it is not surprising that many black students from under-resourced rural and township schools and environments come to university under-prepared for the dominant academic and technological discourses of such an environment. In the following sections I therefore focus on participants' electronic literacy practices, with specific focus on their ICT-literacy practices. Taking into account that literacy is socially situated, and that learners bring with them dominant home discourses and out-of-school practices to the classroom, I focus on ICT access in their high schools, at home, and at university. Then the chapter examines ICT-practice in terms of participants' proficiency, and Internet and online (*Nicenet*) practices, such as their frequency in logging on, and the sites they access. Finally the chapter explores their views on ICT use, in terms of the possible benefits

and challenges. In the thematic analysis extracts of interview transcripts and electronic literacy histories are examined, and reference is made to field notes and diary entries.

*5.6.1 In-school ICT-literacy practices: About access at school “A computer is a luxury, you only get to see it”<sup>134</sup>*

Of the twenty participants, the majority did not have access at school or at home. Of the South African participants, fifteen (75%) said they did not have access to computers and the Internet at school, with only one stating that he had had previous access. The student who had ICT access at school had this to say:

*Lucky:* (We had) just a lab but it was not easy, I was stealing time to go there, but here at the varsity to be told how to use the Internet, it's not really a big work. I don't think we have to be told to do that. OK, it's an easy thing I would say. Some students don't do this. Ja, others type their assignments (for them)<sup>135</sup>. It's just the fear. People are just afraid. There's nothing to be afraid of (14.9.2004).

Lucky was fortunate that his school had a computer laboratory, but he acknowledged the difficulty in getting access to use the computers. His use of “stealing time” to use the computers shows that this was not always an easy task, that time to use computers was not provided for, or that it was not always permitted. This relates to Warschauer's (2003a; 2003b) findings on the model laboratories set up in Egypt, where equipment was not installed or used because of bureaucracy and gate-keeping. Lucky's reference to fear is a common emotion felt by participants with minimal previous ICT-experience, and is indicative of the technophobia felt by several participants at the outset of the project.

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<sup>134</sup> Sibonelo, 14.9.2004.

<sup>135</sup> It is a common occurrence at the University for students who are not computer literate to pay others to type out assignments.

Students who did not have ICT-access at school expressed some of the problems they experienced when they entered university and had to compete on equal terms with students who had previous access to technology:

- Sibonelo:* We had no computers. No computers in school, only the teachers had access. In the office – only one computer for all. The area I come from, Limpopo is one of the poorest. A computer is a luxury, you only get to see it (14.9.2004).
- Elsie:* No, we didn't (have computers). We had a problem when we came here in first year to university we had to type and do all sorts of things. It is so hard when you come from a disadvantaged school (16.9. 2004).
- Adam:* Ja, the principal had it, but if he could use it? (*Shrugs, raising shoulders.*) The teachers could use his (computer), but not the students. Now there is computers for the students in the school. We didn't have it, now they do
- Leila:* How does this make you feel?
- Adam:* Well...like it's not fair, but it's better for them (15.9.2004).
- Leila:* Did you have access to computers and Internet at school?
- Lindiwe:* No, nothing.
- Leila:* So when you got here, what happened?
- Lindiwe:* (Laughs) Whew, it was very difficult. You have to learn even how to use a mouse! (16.9.2004).
- Ernest:* No, never at school. We used to see all this computers and things on TV and we thought one day we would use it. Now they are getting it in school. They are fortunate. They must appreciate it, it is a resource for the future (17.9.2004).
- Alex:* No. The principal, the teachers are saying all the time, be computer literate. With no computers? (20.9.2004).

It is evident from these responses that most of the students were from under-resourced schools, where in some cases only principals, and sometimes teachers had access to ICT. Adam's doubts about whether the principal was computer literate is also typical of what Warschauer (2002a; 2002b; 2003a; 2003b) talks about in Egypt and Ireland, where technology was purchased (in Ireland's case, won) at great expense, but not used, partially because of bureaucracy, and because people were not sufficiently trained in its use. A common thread that emerged is that the participants were encouraged by teachers to use ICT in preparation for university, even though they did not have access at school, for instance, Alex's comment "The principal, the teachers are saying all the time, be computer literate", was applicable to other participants who felt the same way. Another thread is the dissatisfaction felt when participants arrived at university, but were excluded from one of the dominant academic practices of the institution, that is, ICT proficiency. Lindiwe (16.9.2004), for instance commented on

feeling uncomfortable that she could not use computers when she got to university. This issue was obviously recognized by the participants' high school teachers who encouraged the use of ICT. There is also an indication that ICT is currently being introduced to schools (refer for instance to Adam's and Ernest's comments)<sup>136</sup>, the implication being that new students entering university might be better-prepared for its use, provided, of course, that they use the equipment, and that their teachers are trained in its use.

Of the SADC/International students, three had access at school, while one did not.

Xing, for instance, speaks about his high school in Shanghai:

- Xing:* In my high school in Shanghai we had some computer lessons. Now my classmates in Shanghai have their own computers, so we have a lot of opportunities. It helped me when I got here. With the Internet I think I'm good at it.
- Leila:* And do you use the e-mail to keep in touch with people back home?
- Xing:* Yes, we talk to each other and ...actually we have a lot of opportunity to use the Internet because there are many Internet cafes in Shanghai. Everyone uses it. Even you can use public phones and your phone card to log on (14.9.2004).

Xing's comment on being able to log on to the Internet using phone cards was new to me. It is obvious that had Xing remained in Shanghai, he would have been exposed to technology of a far more sophisticated nature. He was obviously also motivated to use e-mail to maintain contact with family and friends in Shanghai. This was common among the other foreign students, as well as those from outside South Africa, such as Natalie, Oscar, and Farzana.

Oscar, who is from Zimbabwe, did not have previous access to ICT at school. However, as an older student, who is also an artist, he had been exposed to technology through his work:

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<sup>136</sup> ICT is being introduced to schools in poorly-resourced areas as a result of donations by companies and parastatals, as well as initiatives such as GautengOnline and SchoolNet Africa, discussed earlier in this thesis.

- Oscar:* Not so much access, but I had a knowledge of computers since I started traveling to and from Europe. But I wasn't a computer genius that time. I started using computers in 2002....when I got my first e-mail address when it was pressurizing me to get contact with the outside world because of a growing number of contacts I was having.
- Leila:* When you say you were traveling to and from Europe, where were you traveling, and for what reason?
- Oscar:* In 1999 I was invited by Germany for an exhibition because two years before that, in 1997, I exhibited for the Clintons<sup>137</sup> and I was the youngest artist there and I was the best seller. What I was doing there was unique. I was the first artist to do Bushman paintings from rocks on textiles because people travel from all over Europe to see those paintings, so I thought of putting it on textiles so they would have that memorabilia in their own homes, so they organized me an exhibition in Europe.
- Leila:* Did you keep in touch with these people, you say that is why you have an e-mail address?
- Oscar:* Actually I keep in touch, it was someone in Europe who said I must do this. Compared to other mediums like phoning it (e-mail) is cheap and fast (16.9.2004).

Oscar was motivated to use ICT because of a need to sustain contact for his work. Of all the participants, Oscar appeared to be more motivated than his classmates, and was always keen to learn more. Oscar made an interesting transition during the course of the year. He often brought along an *mbira*<sup>138</sup> to class at the beginning of the year, but halfway through the first semester this was replaced with a digital camera, which he used to take pictures of everyone in class. He would then e-mail them to anyone who was interested. In the second semester he started to bring along a laptop to class, on which his group would work on their research project, showing his transition to using technology. Students also often listened to music on his laptop. His view that he was not a “computer genius” at the time he started his travels implies that he considers himself very proficient during the course of the project. As an exhibiting artist he was probably in a better position to purchase equipment, and he also had a sponsor in Germany.

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<sup>137</sup> His reference to the Clintons is former President Bill Clinton and his wife Hilary. As a point of interest, Oscar brought me photographs of himself, with former President Bill and Hilary Clinton, posing with one of Oscar's fabric paintings. He also brought along a portfolio of his work in the hope of selling his art.

<sup>138</sup> An African hand-held piano played with the thumbs.

5.6.2 *Out-of-school ICT-literacy practices: About access at home* “You must understand where we are coming from. Even lights is a fairly new thing, even TVs and videos”<sup>139</sup>

Lelliott, Enslin, and Pendlebury (2000), in their paper on online education in Africa, emphasise the more urgent needs such as education, health care and access to basic amenities in Africa, which take precedence over the introduction of technology. Many of the participants used this argument as well when commenting on ICT access in the home. Of the local students, only one participant had access to ICT at home, while fifteen did not. One of the latter fifteen participants, Adam, said that he sometimes went to Internet cafes if there was something urgent he had to do, but also commented on the expense involved. Others said that the only access they had was at university. Mbali commented on the need for more basic amenities, which receive priority in the home.

*Mbali:* You must understand where we are coming from. Even lights is a fairly new thing in some cases, even TVs and videos. Also first we must do the kitchen – the fridge, stove. Computers? No way, maybe with the new generation (10.10.2004).  
*Ernest:* Not even at home, Leila, it was impossible to think of a computer. I could go to town I think to use Internet café, but I wouldn't know how to use it (16.9.2004).

All of the South African participants were receiving Financial Aid packages<sup>140</sup> from the University in order to study, therefore comments such as those by Mbali are hardly surprising, that purchasing computers was not a priority compared with furnishing a home with necessities.

All four of the international students had access to ICT in the home. Natalie, who had access at her home in Maputo, was considering getting a computer in South Africa, while Xing and Farzana also had computers at home in South Africa. It should be

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<sup>139</sup> Mbali, 10.10.2004.

<sup>140</sup> Financial Aid is awarded to certain students who come from disadvantaged homes.

noted that Farzana's father was a PhD student at the University at the time of my study, which might have made the use of a computer necessary at home. The family is also originally from Iran, and maintained, like Xing, regular e-mail contact with friends and relatives back home.

Finally, Oscar had a laptop which he had purchased from funds he obtained selling his art work:

- Leila:* OK, do you have access to a computer where you live and on campus?  
*Oscar:* I have, I can say because I have my laptop.  
*Leila:* Do you have e-mail access on your laptop?  
*Oscar:* I have, but where I am living now they don't have access, they have to connect it.  
*Leila:* What made you decide to get a laptop?  
*Oscar:* I couldn't carry a PC around – you can't walk around with it. When I travel I just pack it in my bag. Everything is there – my music, my videos, my stuff like my school work (16.9.2004).

Participant access to ICT, both at home and at school, was therefore limited, and participants felt marginalized by the divide this created between themselves and students with greater access (refer to students comments discussed earlier about access across the race groups). In the next section, I look at participants' views on access to ICT at the University.

### *5.6.3 University ICT-literacy practices: About access on campus "You are still typing...and you have to go"<sup>141</sup>*

University of Witwatersrand offers all students ICT access in computer laboratories, however, participants do not consider the resources sufficient or suitable. The majority (60%, or twelve participants) found ICT resources on campus limited and unsuitable. Eight participants felt that computer access at the University was suitable.

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<sup>141</sup> Elsie, 16.9.2004.

Of the participants who found ICT access at the University of the Witwatersrand is suitable, Lucky, a drama student said that he also had access to a computer laboratory in the Drama Department. However, the laboratory did not have Internet access, so he had to use the Internet in one of the other laboratories, which is something he needed to do daily in order to check his e-mails (14.9.2004). Mabela (14.9.2004) commented that the access was “very good” although two of the computer laboratories were quite crowded. He found the new laboratory in the library more accessible, with about fifty workstations. Leonard described the situation as “tight”, which when probed, he said meant ‘outstanding’ (14.9.2004).

Of the participants who found access unsuitable, the majority complained that the laboratories were overcrowded, and that they sometimes had to leave just when they were busy typing, either because the laboratories were booked, or because they had other classes to attend. Elsie, for instance said:

- Elsie:* And they tell you right now, not even thirty minutes before ‘We are going to have a tut for Engineering.’ It’s so much to share...you are still typing...and you have to go... Ja, you just have to leave everything even if your assignment is due...
- Leila:* Do you use the other labs?
- Elsie:* Sometimes Senate House, but it’s also busy.
- Leila:* And Wartenweiler?
- Elsie:* The library?
- Leila:* There’s labs there as well now. Other students in class told me so.
- Elsie:* Oh, we can try that (16.9.2004).

Elsie could, however, be misguided about being forced to leave the laboratory while she was busy, because I have observed a teaching timetable posted at the entrance. The timetable indicated when the laboratory was being used as a teaching venue. The problem, the technician said, was that students did not read the timetable and notices, then got upset if they had to move to accommodate classes<sup>142</sup>.

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<sup>142</sup> Personal communication with laboratory technician, May 2004; Field notes, April, 2004.

I had similar experiences when I taught another course in the laboratory, and other students were busy working. Despite booking the laboratory in advance and the timetable stating that the laboratory would be occupied for a teaching session, students would have to be asked to leave, something they were not very happy to do. As stated in Chapter 4, a further problem was that the Humanities laboratory had a foldaway partition running down the middle of the room so that two laboratories of twenty workstations each could be created and that a class could be taught in one section, while students who were not part of that class could use computers in the other section. This situation was not ideal as the class being taught could be heard in the other section.

Sometimes students employed innovative tactics in order to get computer access on campus. Xing's comments may be taken into account:

- Xing:* I like to use the computers here, but the situation is not good. There are twenty thousand students in Wits, and the computers are not enough.
- Leila:* Do you have a lab in the Commerce department?
- Xing:* No, I use FNB and Senate House<sup>143</sup>, and I have friends in Medical School, I use their computers.
- Leila:* Do you have access there?
- Xing:* Well, not really, I swipe their cards (14.9.2004).

In order to gain access to a computer laboratory, students are required to swipe their student cards. They are not allowed to use the cards belonging to other students. However, this appeared to be the only way Xing found of getting access to computers.

Participants therefore found the number of computers insufficient, and said that sometimes the computers did not work. Oscar said:

- Oscar:* Ja, we have quite a number of labs, but they are not sufficient enough. You can go into a lab and wait for 45 minutes to use a computer. Or the lab, half of the computers

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<sup>143</sup> First National Bank building and Senate House are two of the buildings in which computer laboratories are located.

will not be working. I don't think there's enough access for the amount of work students have to do on computers and Internet (16.9.2004).

I observed during several of my observation sessions as well that certain computers were not working, once as many as six of the forty (Field notes, April, May, June, 2004). In addition to issues of access, I thought it important to establish the extent to which participants are proficient in the use of ICT, because of the impact this could have on their participation. In relation to proficiency, students were given a proficiency questionnaire<sup>144</sup> at the beginning of the year, and I later asked them about their proficiency during interviews. The following section expands.

*5.7 ICT-literacy practice: Student proficiency "I make mistakes, lose the file, start again."*<sup>145</sup>

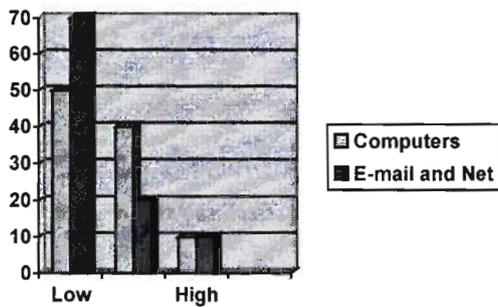
In this section I asked participants to rate their proficiency in ICT. At the beginning of the year participants indicated that they were generally lacking in proficiency in computers, e-mail and the Internet, as is shown in Figure 5.7 overleaf:

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<sup>144</sup> Please refer to Appendix 2 for a copy of the proficiency survey.

<sup>145</sup> Ernest, 20.9.2004.

Figure 5.7.1: Student proficiency at the beginning of OLEP



According to Figure 5.7.1, over two-thirds of the participants (70%) of the participants felt that their e-mail and Internet proficiency was not adequate, while half (50%) felt they were not very proficient in the use of computers. Predictably, however, by the end of the course, most participants felt that their proficiency in computer-use, e-mail and the Internet had improved to a great extent. Although most of the participants had not used computers at school and did not have access at home, Figure 5.7.2 demonstrates how participants rated their proficiency at the end of the online course, and indicates that they were actually attaining proficiency quite fast as a result of the online intervention:

Figure 5.7.2 Student ICT proficiency at the end of OLEP

Degree of proficiency	Student numbers	Student names
Good	11	Xing, Oscar, Zinhle, Adam, Precious, Natalie, Lucky, Mabela, Leonard, Alex, Blessing
Average, still learning	7	Herman, Farzana, Elsie, Nothando, Lindiwe, Ernest, Mbali
Not good at all	2	Sibonelo, Musa

As indicated above, most of the participants felt that they were quite proficient at using ICT, and that they had learnt a substantial amount about computers by the end of the course. Adam (15.9.2004), for instance, felt that he was suitably proficient to be able to teach someone else what he knew. Of the participants who felt they were still

learning, Farzana (26.8.2004) felt that perhaps speed was a problem, something that other students such as Lindiwe and Ernest also commented on:

- Lindiwe:* In the beginning I was slow, like one by one (gestures with fingers)...I was typing. But it showed me how to type, still I type like that (laughs) (16.9.2004).
- Ernest:* Now I say it is getting OK. First it was so slow, now I am learning to do it. But I make mistakes, lose the file, start again (17.9.2004).

Elsie describes how she went about learning to use *Nicenet* with assistance from another student:

- Elsie:* Um, it's...it's... after the *Nicenet* class I was helped by P...(another student)... because I tried to see you but you were out. He came, he helped me with my password and I was able to register myself. The instructions were quite simple to follow, very clear. My password had expired and I had to get another one. The first person I e-mailed was Oscar 'cos when I opened my messages I found this topic of polygamy and it was so interesting, and I asked him what he thought...it was quite fun, like talking out of class.
- Leila:* So would you say your proficiency is quite good now?
- Elsie:* I am improving more every day (16.9.2004).

Elsie shows how, with guidance and assistance, she was able to move from being a peripheral participant to an active member of the online class, reminiscent of Lave and Wenger's (1991, 1996, 2002) and Rogoff's (2003) theories on how participants move from the periphery, to the centre of the COP.

As referred to earlier, Sibonelo (14.9.2004) suggested that his background played a role in his lack of proficiency. Of all the participants, Sibonelo, a Law student, often commented on the disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances leading to his arrival at university. He displayed a strong sense of justice and often quoted from the *Constitution* (1996) to support human rights issues.

- Sibonelo:* Ja, I'm not so good, because the background I come from is very disadvantaged. We had no computers. No computers in school, only the teachers had access. In the office – only one computer for all. The area I come from, Limpopo is one of the poorest. A computer is a luxury, you only get to see it (14.9.2004).

Thus, despite enjoying access to equal resources and support at the the University of the Witwatersrand, the digital divide was conspicuous in class, where I was conscious that I too was in a position of advantage and privilege. I recognized that I was very much a ‘have’ because I had ICT access at home and at work, testimony of my more privileged circumstances. Concerns such as these indicate the greater power struggles, where students who have access to the dominant discourses and practices are privileged by the higher education system, while those who do not feel justifiably disempowered. In the section that follows I explore another facet of participants’ ICT practice, namely, how they learnt to use the medium.

### 5.8 ICT-literacy practice: Taking multiple routes in learning to use ICT

As referred to in the previous section, I also found participants’ views on how they learnt to use ICT relevant. I stated in Chapter 1 and earlier in this chapter that the University does not provide computer literacy courses to students. Students may pay to attend computer literacy courses, or certain departments get senior students to teach newcomers the basics. The following table, with data elicited from the interviews, demonstrates the multiple routes taken by participants to become computer literate.

*Figure 5.8.1: Learning to use ICT*

How learnt	Number	Student names
Friends	4	Herman, Precious, Elsie, Blessing
Family	1	Farzana
School (mostly international students)	4	Farzana, Natalie (only the basics), Xing, Lucky (a little)
Short course in computer literacy	4	Mabela (failed), Sibonelo (still not good), Leonard (failed), Zinhle (course was adequate)
Self-taught	4	Oscar, Nothando, Adam, Ernest
Notes	1	Elsie
Previous university	1	Musa
Another department	1	Lindiwe (senior student tutors in the Geography Department)
Observing/asking others	2	Alex, Mbali
Practice	2	Herman, Lucky
Laboratory technician	1	Herman
Lecturer	1	Elsie

The most popular methods included being taught by friends, attending a short course, and being self-taught. Three of the international students had some previous access to computers at school, where they became computer literate, however, they had not used the Net at school, or as a teaching-learning tool. Of the four participants who paid to attend different short courses in computer literacy, two, Mabela and Leonard, failed. Participants also described how they became computer literate in their electronic literacy histories. Leonard commented that not being able to use ICT left him feeling “less worthy” than other first year students:

I feel less worthy if I do not have ICT use. If you make it here it is not the end of the road. I went to a course, but even the course was a waste. I went with M.... but even with a friend its not the best thing if two don't know. You can feel stupid (Electronic literacy history, 20.02.2004).

His use of “less worthy” and “stupid” indicate that he felt disempowered and marginalized that he was not proficient in the use of ICT. Only one participant, Zinhle, felt that the course attended was good, while Sibho felt that the course he attended was not helpful at all, as he was still lacking in some of the basic skills. Generally, these participants still observed others and asked for assistance, for instance Sibho said “as I watch other people and they help me, I am learning” (14.9.2004). Still others, such as Alex and Mbali, relied on help from other students:

*Alex:* When I got here at Wits it was a big shock. All the students could type, even I used to see this at home with some varsity students. They say they are computer literate. I did not know what to do. I did this short course but it wasn't enough, so other students in class they show me a lot. Also I ask (20.9.2004).

*Mbali:* I watch other students in class. They know what to do. Then I do it. Then I also ask if I need help. Computers make me to feel like something. Everywhere, all over the world, it's computers, for jobs, studies, everything. Now I feel like something (10.10.2004).

Students were therefore primarily reliant on guidance and assistance, further evidence that they functioned in COPs. Mbali went so far as to say that computers give her a sense of being “something”, which is reminiscent of Feenberg's (1991) views about ICT being related to issues of class and power, and Gee's (1996) perspective on power and literacy, in this case, electronic literacy. Mbali equated computer literacy

with a sense of power, status and achievement. She also recognised the need for computers in relation to jobs and studies, reminiscent of Fang and Warschauer's (2004) findings on the combination of English and technological skills providing valuable job market skills. In her electronic literacy history Mbali wrote about her very early fascination with the electronic, in this case, her family's first television set.

She recalled:

My family got the first TV. It was so joyous. We used a car battery to charge the TV. Then we will sit around, laugh, watch. Even the neighbours, they came to visit when it was time for tv. It was regular. Sometimes the battery will fail, and we can do nothing...we would wait for my father to charge (it), then we can watch again. But sometimes even the neighbours get jealous for this - we had the tv (Electronic literacy history, 20. 02. 2004).

Watching television became a communal experience, with neighbours coming over to watch as well, although Mbali's comment on their jealousy indicates that the family had become a 'have' and gained prestige on getting a television set, which could have distanced them somewhat from the rest of the community. She mentions also that the set had to be charged using a car battery, which was common practice in areas lacking electricity.

Similar experiences were noted when students used or got cell phones for the first time. They found that their cell phones created better opportunities for communication and socialisation. As is analysed later in Chapter 6, participants transferred their cell phone messaging skills to their discussion thread postings, for instance by using abbreviations and symbols to reduce the time needed to write messages, or as a substitute for non-verbal cues (Murray, 2000).

Mbali further described an early computer experience in her electronic literacy history: her aunt had a computer at home, but she kept it covered to keep the dust off, and none of the children were allowed to use it. Mbali wrote about how an older

cousin said that a computer must be used, or it would be outdated, but still the little cousins were instilled with fear that something would happen if they touched it. The computer remained an expensive ornament. Mbali wrote: “There is always this fear if you touch it something will happen” (Electronic literacy history, 20.2. 2004).

Conversations with other participants over the year revealed similar views of computer and electronic literacy as a route to eventual success. However, as mentioned earlier in this thesis, Warschauer (2002a; 2002b; 2003a; 2003b; 2004b) also cautions against the determinist view that suggests that the mere presence of technology will bring about social change. Rather change and inclusion lies in how technology is utilised.

Elsie accredited the facilitator for her computer literacy. Elsie often went into full narrative when interviewed, and told me of her experiences in attaining computer literacy:

*Elsie:* It was through Leila. I was so scared (laughs)...the first time I went to the lab I had a password and username...but... but it just didn't work, it made me to be demotivated. But if it wasn't for you, I would not have started because you made it happen for us. I was so scared, I had to talk to myself. I would carry your notes and say everyday “Today I will do it”. And my password would deny. I will leave everything. She, Nothando, also helped me. I never thought one day I would use a computer even (16.9.2004).

Elsie also gave credit to other students in class for what she has achieved. During the course of the online intervention she also showed concern for other students<sup>146</sup>. In many cases, participants indicated the sense of achievement they felt when they were

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<sup>146</sup> Elsie consulted and e-mailed me often, in one case regarding a student who had been absent for some time. When I investigated, I found that the student was experiencing financial problems, and was also quite ill. I must admit that Elsie provided the stimulus for action so that the student could be assisted. It also so happened that the same student had helped her join the *Nicenet* class when she had difficulties.

able to use the technology, and thus gain membership to one of the dominant discourses of the university community (Gee, 1996).

Other participants stated that they were self-taught. Nothando (16.9.2004), for example, described how she was able to solve a problem with her mouse by pretending she was using a laptop. Adam displayed a sense of determination and independence in his attempt to become computer literate. He wrote in his electronic literacy history: “I said to myself there is no way I will let it pass. I have to know it. It was the opportunity”(Electronic literacy history, 20.2.2004).

Adam proved to be quite independent as a person as well, and spoke about his mother living and working overseas as a nurse, which no doubt necessitated his use of e-mail as a means of maintaining contact with her (Conversation; Diary entry, August 2004). Ernest described the confusion of being a new student at the beginning of the year, where the need to become computer literate, he felt, is almost an additional burden:

*Ernest:* Whew, when I got here it was bad, so bad, sort out registration, residence, bursary...then the classes start and all the lecturers say we must use a computer. We are in first year, we say how can we, it is so hard (laughs). Then we start to learn. I tell myself I must do it, I can do it. So I watch, do a few lessons, and I practice, everyday I practice. Some of these students they have computers at home so they know how. They are fortunate. It is important this computer (17.9.2004).

Also evident is the barrier between those with access to ICT and those without, highlighting the sense of inclusion-exclusion. Of the participants who claim to be self-taught, all display a sense of independence, determination, and perseverance to succeed. Such characteristics are intrinsic to self-direction or learner autonomy, and will be expanded on in Chapter 7.

It is evident from the above data that access to ICT practices are limited, and that proficiency, although improving, was limited at the beginning of the project. Most

participants were self-taught, and those who displayed an independent perseverance tended to decide what they wanted to do and how to achieve their goals. Common to all participants is the feeling of alienation and exclusion, of not being part of the dominant academic discourse without computer literacy. In the following section I continue examining participants' ICT-literacy practice, this time from the perspective of their Internet and *Nicenet* practices.

## 5.9 ICT-literacy practice: Internet and online (*Nicenet*) practices

As discussed in Chapter 3, as well as in the introduction to this chapter, literacy is viewed as a social practice (Street, 1984, 1993, 1998, 2003, and others). Learners' social and out-of-school practices cannot be ignored in relation to the value these add to the classroom. This section examines how often participants used the Net, and the types of sites they accessed voluntarily. It also explores how they use the *Nicenet* class, and their views on the system.

### 5.9.1 Internet practices

Participants in the study varied with regard to how often they logged onto the Net.

Figure 5.9.1 illustrates this diversity:

Figure 5.9.1: Participants' frequency in logging on

Frequency in logging on	Number of participants	Participants
Nil	1	Natalie
Every fortnight	1	Lindiwe
1 to 2 times a week	5	Sibonelo, Xing, Elsie, Adam, Musa,
3 times a week	9	Herman, Farzana, Precious, Nothando, Zinhle, Alex, Blessing, Mbali
4 times a week	1	Ernest
Daily	4	Mabela, Leonard, Oscar, Lucky

Not all the participants logged onto the Internet regularly. Although most logged on three times per week, others, such as Natalie did not generally log on at all. However,

at the end of the year, after the examinations, Natalie e-mailed me with queries about her results, indicating that she too had begun to overcome her initial apprehension of logging on.

To establish general patterns of Internet use as a social practice, I also examined the types of sites participants accessed. These sites students accessed voluntarily because the Foundation course does not stipulate that students access particular sites. The data was elicited from interviews and observations. Participants displayed a wide range of interests, some linked to their courses of study, while others were for fun and entertainment. Several participants indicated a preference for free 'sms' sites such as those offered by Vodacom. Here they would send free sms'es to friends and family *via* the Internet. During an observation quite early on in the project (March 2004), I read a notice in the computer laboratory stating that students would be banned from using the laboratories should they access free sms sites. When I asked the technician the reason for this he said that students wasted time sms'ing friends, and that students who needed to use the computers for assignments and research were prevented from doing so if all the computers were being used (Conversation with laboratory technician, April, 2004). However, this did not appear to deter some of the participants in this study, as they continued to access the sms sites. Figure 5.9.2 overleaf presents an overview the types of sites accessed.

Figure 5.9.2: Types of Internet sites accessed by participants

Participants	Types of sites visited
Herman	Research sites, sites which help with assignments, Chinese e-pals
Farzana	Research sites, Persian newspapers and magazines, Iranian university sites
Precious	Contact friends, sms sites
Lucky	Research sites, plays, playwrights, scripts
Mabela	Music, entertainment
Leonard	Entertainment, sport
Oscar	Music, entertainment, art, sms sites
Elsie	Constitutional court website
Nothando	sms, movies, SABC, university websites
Zinhle	News, jokes
Adam	Research for project on language policy, Chinese e-pals, radio
Musa	Research sites
Lindiwe	Free sms sites
Ernest	Research sites, entertainment, free sms sites,
Alex	Research sites, music, sport
Blessing	Magazines, beauty sites for his girlfriend, news
Mbali	Free sms sites, music, research

Farzana used the e-mail facility to keep in touch with family and friends at home in Iran. Later in the year she indicated that she would like to return to Iran and had been in touch with Iranian universities to enquire if she could transfer her studies. Her sister, who had also been a student at the University of the Witwatersrand, had returned to Iran in the second semester. Farzana enjoyed being able to use Persian, her home language, and said that the Internet, especially the e-mail helped her feel closer to home.

With regard to music sites, because the computers in the student laboratories did not have audio facilities, students were not able to listen to music, but read up on the sites of radio stations. The laboratory technician also kept the only pair of headphones in the laboratory. Several participants expressed a desire to listen to music, which they would have done if sound cards were installed on all the computers, however, this was reportedly beyond the laboratory budget (Conversation with laboratory technician, May, 2004).

For many, the Internet and e-mail in particular enabled them to communicate with friends, especially those who were at other universities. The issue of contact and communication will be resumed in more detail in Chapter 6, in the section on ‘communities of practice’. In the section that follows I explore participants’ use of *Nicenet*.

### 5.9.2 *Online Nicenet practices*

To reiterate, the purpose behind using the *Nicenet* system was for students to access notes, and to communicate with me and other students online. As shown in Chapter 4, thirteen students participated in the *Nicenet* online class: Herman, Farzana, Precious, Lucky, Xing, Oscar, Elsie, Ernest, Alex, Blessing, Mbali, Zinhle and Adam. Natalie, Sibho, Nothando, Lindiwe, Mabela, Leonard and Musa did not.

Most of the users found the *Nicenet* system relatively simple to operate and found the notes that I had given them to follow quite helpful. Farzana (26.8.2004), for instance felt: “Yes, (I enjoyed it) very much. It helped me to get a lot of information that I couldn’t get in class. I was reading my notes on the Internet class”. Lucky had this to say when asked if he enjoyed using the system:

- Leila:* And what did you find about it that you enjoyed?  
*Lucky:* Um, communicating with other students and what you call, the reviews of what we were doing in classes...that was very important because I was just having the summary of everything, ja (yes).  
*Leila:* OK, and how did you use the notes?  
*Lucky:* I was printing them and pasting them in my books (14.9.2004).

Not all comments were positive. Xing (14.9.2004) and Oscar (16.9.2004) said they were a little disappointed with the system because they felt I should have updated it more regularly, and that students should have participated more frequently. Oscar also felt there was some repetition. Remember, Oscar logged on daily to check his e-mail,

and spent a substantial amount of time on the computer. Sometimes he would e-mail me a query and when I responded he mailed me back immediately, indicating that he was logged on at the same time.

Part of the problem in not uploading new summaries and questions daily was because the majority of students did not access the *Nicenet* class daily. Adam, who found the system easy to access, found the summaries useful, but also felt that the system could benefit from more input. Zinhle (15.9.2004) also found the articles and summaries useful, but did not participate in discussion. Adam (15.9.2004) also made use of the e-pal connection, through which he communicated with five Chinese e-pals. This is discussed further in the section on global communities of practice in Chapter 6.

Alex (15.8.2004) found the system interesting and participated in discussion. In a conversation we had during the year, he said he mentioned the online class to people at home, and that they encouraged him to use as much ICT as possible, because they attributed status to computer literacy. I found this to be a common occurrence, where participants said that family members would encourage them to get as much exposure to ICT as possible at university, because they felt it would benefit them in later years.

Mbali mentioned the sense of achievement she had in experimenting with something new, to the extent that she felt she could become the teacher:

*Mbali:* Ja, it was so interesting. In the beginning we just helped each other, then we became the teachers. When the other students did not know what to do, we were helping. It was like a reward. We knew something they did not. Ja, we had fun. Even in the second semester it was helpful to others (10.4.2004).

While most participants were comfortable talking about their achievements on the online environment, others did not participate as enthusiastically, and the causes and reasons are explained in the next section.

### 5.9.3 Demotivation and dissuasion from using *Nicenet*

Students who did not join the online class said they had various reasons for not doing so, including access, busy schedules, demotivation and laziness. Natalie, a Portuguese mother-tongue speaker, did not access the *Nicenet* system. Often she would use her limited English proficiency as a reason for not participating, and it became what I saw as an excuse for not accessing the system:

*Leila:* The *Nicenet* class I set up? Did you access it at all?  
*Natalie:* No, I didn't, (laughs)...too much and my English is not so good. Now I am thinking to have Internet at home. My friend says it's not so expensive, but I have to because it's useful for researching and e-mails, my family (13.9.2004).

Mabela (14.9.2004) and Leonard (14.9.2004), who joined the group in the second semester, both felt that they were too busy when they joined my tutorial group to join the class. Both thought that it was just after the June examination and that their results had been disappointing, so they should concentrate on the traditional lectures. However, they considered that the system itself would not be difficult to access, although it might be time-consuming. Leonard said that someone from my first semester tutorial group had showed him the system in the first semester, and that it "looked interesting"<sup>147</sup>.

Sibo (14.9.2004) said he was demotivated because he had previous experiences where he did not have access or time, which dissuaded him from participating in the online class. Musa, on the other hand, confessed that he was too lazy to join. Musa had spent the previous year at another university, where he had not passed. He was accepted as a

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<sup>147</sup> Students from different tutorial groups would often discuss what each group was currently doing, and this sometimes led to students asking to join other groups, often because another tutor appeared to have a more exciting class! As tutors, we tended to dissuade students from changing groups unless there were justifiable complaints or reasons for wanting to do so.

student at the University of the Witwatersrand in the year that my research was conducted.

*Musa:* Uh...(hesitates) I guess it was just lazy. I had the notes, I kept saying I will do it but it never came up. Not that I experienced problems. It never came up. There was always something else to do at the computer...assignments, research (16.9.2004).

Lindiwe attributed her lack of participation to limited time:

*Lindiwe:* Ja, the thing was it was difficult for time, but if I did have time I would. Because with readings we have to do the whole reading and understand it ourselves, unlike on the Nicenet class they give you the summary and everything and that would have helped me (16.9.2004).

A key factor around participation on the *Nicenet* system was that it was not a requirement of the course, and many students put it off as being unimportant. However, although the majority of the participants had only started using the Internet in the year that this study had been conducted (2004), they already developed an idea of what they considered the advantages and disadvantages of using the Net. The following section presents their perceptions of the benefits and challenges.

### **5.10 Perceptions of benefits and challenges of using the Net: “You can’t get lost”<sup>148</sup>**

In his review of the views of techno-optimists and techno-pessimists, Warschauer (1999a: 11-12) cites Roszak (1994), Postman (1993,1995) and Birkets (1994) who consider the Net shallow, vacuous, and lacking in critical theory. Joyce actually refers to the Net as “...the zombie’s newsstand...where lots of glossy things wave in the light” (in Warschauer, 1999a:12). On the other hand, Lanham (1993), Bolter (1991), and Landow (1992) regard the Net as facilitating a dynamic approach to learning and critical thinking.

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<sup>148</sup> Nothando, 16.9.2004.

Thus, there are ambivalent views of the contributions of the Net. Participants included among the benefits that the Net provides greater access to information and resources, unlimited access and contact, and that it improves reading and writing skills. The optimists included Herman, Sibho, Natalie, Zinhle, Musa, Lindiwe and Alex. Sibho, for instance said:

*Sibho:* Ja, a great advantage because this is an easier way of getting information than the library, if you go there the book is out, pages are torn. The library is good, but on the computer, the information is always there (16.9.2004).

However, Mbali added a note of caution when she said that because of the amount of information, users had to learn to be selective. She said:

*Mbali:* You must not get fooled that you get everything...you want. You have to choose what is right for what you want. The Net won't give it to you. It will give you everything, you must look for what it is...relevant (10.4.2004).

A second advantage reported is that it provides unlimited access outside the classroom. Precious felt that it was helpful if one missed a class, that the Internet, and in particular, *Nicenet*, provided a back-up. However, the reverse is also true; that students might be tempted to miss classes and compensate for work missed by getting their notes online.

Lucky commented that class extended beyond regular class time, and that with the use of the Net "the learning follows you" (14.9.2004). Nothando also used an interesting metaphor about using the Net:

*Nothando:* Ja, I remember the first time my mum sent me to Jo'burg I said no... I'm gonna get lost. She said take a pen and a paper...she wrote everything down ... you get off from here, turn left, turn right...that's a computer, Net...you can't get lost (16.9.2004).

Ernest also spoke about the way in which contact improves, although he recognized that sometimes the type of communication might be too casual:

*Ernest:* Oh, ja, there are advantages – definitely. We can contact people, the English improves, but sometimes it is too casual. Also for work – everyone says for jobs you

must know the computer, so it is important. Also the Internet brings you into contact with people you never knew before, it's so easy, click, click (*Gestures clicking motion with hand*) (17.9.2004).

Adam agreed that it facilitated contact, and that it helped to read the views of other people. Ernest and Mbali mentioned the need for external, global contact. Mbali was also concerned about the need for progress in South Africa. She said:

*Mbali:* I think we have to have it, it is a necessity today for everything we do. We are moving out of Third World in South Africa. So the Internet can provide us with progress. We can't say no to progress (10.10.2004).

The final advantage reported by Ernest was that reading and writing skills improve, which adds to one's prospects in the job market. Here, I expect it was the writing practice that helped participants in terms of writing skills. Some might consider the use of e-mail and discussion thread language as debasing writing skills, because of the non-standard use of the language, for example, the use of abbreviations and symbols. However, when asked by Ancker (2002: 5-6) about the possible debasement of language, Warschauer said he felt that this was not possible, and that the use of language in electronic media should be considered as a different register, which should be pointed out to students. In relation to reading, students had to read more, and contribute critically to online and face-to-face discussion of readings, which could help improve reading and comprehension skills. However, this study did not set out to evaluate possible improvement in reading and writing skills, and the views on improvement in these skills remain participant perceptions.

The perceived disadvantages or challenges of the Net were generally attributed to students' fear of technology (or technophobia), lack of skills, limited access, outdated, slow technology, poor time management, and that the Net encourages laziness.

In relation to technophobia, both Herman and Ernest commented that many students are afraid of technology because they had not been exposed to technology before, and

Ernest said:

*Ernest:* Ja, it's not so easy if you see our schools, or if it is possible. You have to just start, *eish (an expression of disbelief)*....One time I was in the lab, didn't know where to start and someone he showed me some things (17.9.2004).

The strongest disadvantage was attributed to students' lack of skills. Herman, Farzana, Bob, Lindi and Mbali felt that far too many undergraduate students do not have technological skills, which places them at a disadvantage when other students are using technology. They felt computer literate students were being privileged. Mbali commented: "It's sad when students don't know what they are looking for. They come to the lab and they are lost. No skills" (10.10.2004).

A third disadvantage stemmed from lack of access. Here Sibon, Oscar, Alex and Blessing agreed that insufficient access was an issue. Alex articulated the following frustration:

*Alex:* Also it is frustrating if you want to work but the computer labs are full, so there must be more labs. And everyone must have a course when they come here in the first year, or how can they learn? (20.9.2004).

Oscar felt that although lack of access was an issue, when they were given access, it was actually considered prestigious.

*Oscar:* One big disadvantage here at Wits will be the access of computers. Computer access. It is very hard, I have even been telling some of my family and friends that we are having an Internet class. They were so surprised. They never heard of such a thing before. That is prestigious for us. But I think it is more useful, for someone to be in the mode of learning you have to be eager to find new things, interesting things so that will be good learning (16.9.2004).

Oscar's comment that people have to be "eager" to learn is interesting because enthusiasm, identified by Guglielmino (1977, 1997), is one of the characteristics of self-direction.

Blessing became quite emotional when she commented that white and Indian students have better access to ICT. She associated the situation with the political situation in South Africa and what she considered the lack of democracy, implying that it is the black students who are at the greatest disadvantage because they lack access. This raises a theme of power and exclusion, which pervades in both the literature and in participants' experiences. Blessing expressed concern that lack of access ultimately impinged on one's future career prospects. She said:

*Blessing:* Students aren't taught – this makes me angry. This is the disadvantage. If we are not taught, we pick up the skills if we can. White students can do it, even Indian students if they have computers in school and at home. It becomes a political issue. This is not a democracy. How can we compete for jobs then? (27.9.2004).

A strong disadvantage that came through from Precious, Natalie, Elsie, Nothando and Zinhle, is the lack of time management when students go on the Net. These participants said that, on one hand, there is insufficient time to use the Net, and on the other, once students are logged onto the Net, they do not manage their time well, to the extent that they miss class, or access sites for entertainment purposes, rather than doing what they need to in terms of research and assignments. Nothando felt there were disadvantages in terms of time, but also felt that the time spent makes students more proficient. She had this to say:

*Nothando:* Mostly it's the time, cos when I get on the computer I don't wanna move, just stay ..and I spend a lot of my time in the lab...I get attached to it a lot...but this makes us better too (16.9.2004).

To compound the problem, Xing commented that even if you know what you are looking for, often there is too much to choose from. Leonard also found the extensiveness of information available on the Net to be problematic. Derewianka's (1993) comments on the breadth, rather than the depth of the Net are applicable here.

Another concern, expressed by Alex, was that the Net might encourage laziness if students do not apply themselves to the tasks at hand. He felt that there was so much on the Net, but that students must not rely only on the Net for research as there were other methods and libraries still had an important role to play.

### **5.11 Reflecting on participants' perceptions of the use of ICT**

The use of ICT in teaching and learning is not common practice in SLLS. Drawing on the work of Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic (2000), Street (1984, 1993, 1998, 2003), and Gee (1996, 1997, 2000)<sup>149</sup>, I found in relation to electronic (ICT) literacy practice that the majority of the participants had minimal access to ICT at home and previously at school, and their proficiency, when they entered the University, was minimal. The theorists argue that different literacies are associated with different domains of life, and that literacy practices are patterned by power relationships and social institutions. This was evident in participants' feelings of marginalisation that they did not belong to one of the dominant academic discourses of the university, in this case, the discourse of ICT-literacy. Most experienced this as disabling, to the extent that it created a divide between them and students who have had better access, usually students of other race groups. The digital divide, which students viewed as a legacy of South Africa's apartheid past, was thus a pervasive presence, not just in the communities that the participants come from, but in the university environment as well. However, participants who were autonomous and motivated appeared to overcome these gaps and attain the skills necessary to succeed.

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<sup>149</sup> They suggest that literacy is not a skill, but a social practice that is embedded in broader social goals.

In terms of Internet use, participants logged on to a variety of sites depending on their interest. In terms of use of the online class, 65% of the participants in the study participated in the class, while 35%, for various reasons, did not. Participants who used the class found it to be easy and enjoyable to use.

On the whole, participants found that the Net and Nicenet offered diverse benefits, including unlimited information, ease of use, facilitation of contact, and some found a general improvement in English skills such as reading and writing. The disadvantages included technophobia, lack of skills, limited access, outdated technology, poor time management and 'laziness'. The divide appears to perpetuate experiences of inclusion-exclusion among participants. One of the most significant fears expressed by participants is that the lack of access to technology could impact on their future commercial, material, and economic prospects, thus widening the divide. This I consider a pertinent fear, which, in my experience, has already made an impact on participants' academic lives. Thus, the possible impact on their future prospects remains unknown.

Having analysed the participants' home, school and university ICT-literacy practices, as well as their perceptions of the use of ICT, and recognizing that individuals are members of interconnected communities, who learn through guided participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991, 1996, 2002; Rogoff, 2003), Chapter 6 provides a more detailed analysis of participant-interaction and identity construction within the online communities. This chapter establishes the extent to which learners participate in online communities of practice.

## CHAPTER 6

### **Making meaning: Negotiation, participation and constructing identities in online communities of practice**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

In Chapter 5 I established that the use of ICT in teaching is limited in the School of Literature and Language Studies. I found that the majority of participants had minimal access to ICT at home and previously at school, and their proficiency, when they entered the university, was minimal. Proponents of literacy as social practice and New Literacy Studies, such as Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic (2000), Street (1984, 1993, 1998, 2003), and Gee (1996, 1997, 2000), argue that literacy practices are patterned by power relationships and social institutions. This was evident in participants' feelings of marginalisation, that because of their limited electronic literacy, they did not belong to one of the dominant academic discourses of the university. In response to my first research question on the electronic (ICT) literacy practices of higher education English second and additional language speakers, I established that although access is limited, proficiency is improving, and participants perceive ICT to play a valuable role in their futures.

Having established the broader electronic (ICT) literacy practices emanating from my data, in this chapter I examine the online class more closely, to ascertain how participants make meaning of the new online learning experience. The issue of participation and practice is important to address how participants make meaning, and addresses my second and third research questions, which focus on online relationships, interaction, and identities. The chapter is structured in two main sections: first, participant relationships in communities of practice, and second, participant constructions of identity.

In the first section I draw on constructivist principles, as discussed in the theoretical framework (Chapter 3), that learning is based on the premise that we construct our own understanding of the world by reflecting on our experiences, and that we generate our own rules and mental models in order to make sense of our experiences. I also draw on sociocultural theory, in which learners are not perceived as isolated entities, rather they are part of a supportive community with whom they can share and interact. ‘Communities of practice’ (COPs), as discussed in the theoretical framework, emphasise the interconnectedness of people, learning, practice, participation, and the social world. Therefore I examine participants’ emerging online practices in relation to Lave and Wenger’s (1991, 1996, 2002) and Rogoff’s (2003) views of COPs. My focus here is to establish how participants interact, and how they build and sustain online relationships, in order to answer my second research question, “What relationships do participants develop in online spaces?” I examine data elicited from semi-structured interviews conducted with participants, as well as postings made to discussion threads, personal journal entries, and field notes to ascertain the extent to which relationships are facilitated in online COPs.

Having observed carefully participants’ online interactions over the course of the year, I found it impossible to make a distinction between how participants interacted online, from how they constructed their identities in general. I found that they were positioning themselves in the world, through their use of language, in multiple ways often determined by power relations, using the online medium. Thus, in the second section of this chapter, I examine the construction of participant identities, in the light of what Castells (1997, 2004) poses from a sociological perspective, that all identities are constructed, and that the social construction of identity takes place in a context

marked by power relationships. In addition, I refer to Hall's (1992) view that the crisis of identity is seen as part of a wider process of change, which is dislocating the central structures and processes of modern societies, and that people increasingly make meaning, not on the basis of what they do, but on the basis of what they are, or believe they are. I also draw on Ivanic's (1998) assertion that writers portray themselves through their texts, as well as Lam's (2000) views on textual identity, or how participants position themselves through their texts. This is in response to my third question "How do participants construct identities in online environments?" In the sections that follow, I explore communities of practice in relation to the online relationships that emerged.

## **6.2 Communities of practice**

To recapitulate briefly, Chapter 3 described how COPs are formed, and how the acquisition of knowledge is seen as a social process, with 'new-comers' or novices to the community participating in its practices peripherally, until they are assisted by 'old-timers' or more experienced participants, to central participation. To a certain extent, this was demonstrated in Chapter 5, where I described how participants assisted one another in attaining computer literacy. Thus, social factors, especially those that impact on how participants relate to one another, are important. Smith (1999), for instance, suggests that computer-mediated communication (CMC) contributes to more than just one-on-one relationships, and that "CMC promotes the growth, development and maintenance of communal relationships as well" (1999:87). These relationships form virtual communities, and when sufficient people engage in public discussions, over a substantial period of time, they form what Rheingold (1993, 2000: online, 6 of 16) refers to as "webs of personal relationships in cyberspace".

A central notion of COPs is legitimate peripheral participation, which is the process through which new-comers move to attain full participation through a process of apprenticeship (or guided assistance) by more experienced participants. Lave and Wenger (1991,1996, 2002) emphasise that participation is based on negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world, which implies constant interaction. Lave and Wenger (1991) add that to focus on participation implies focus on the person, which is a somewhat paradoxical notion in a community. However, any study of the sociocultural context involves focus on the person as person-in-the-world, and as a member of a sociocultural community<sup>150</sup>. Hence, I focus not just on the individual, but on the individual in his/her social world.

There is some debate about whether COPs could exist in online environments. Hildreth, Kimble and Wright (1998, 2000) who locate their work in organizational contexts, found that virtual communities are applicable to the educational context in terms of the core elements of communities. However, unlike my case study, their case studies in organizations focus purely on online communities, where there is no face-to-face contact. They found that while shared practices, language and tools are possible in virtual communities, an area that is not so easy to translate into virtual dimensions is the facilitation of participation. Participation, which is crucial to the evolution of a community and the creation of relationships, helps develop a sense of trust and identity, all of which define the community<sup>151</sup>. In my case study many of these practices and relationships were already established in the face-to-face lessons with students, since the participants had the opportunity to interact both face-to-face

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<sup>150</sup> An interesting comparison can be made here with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* (more so the isiZulu saying “*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*,” literally meaning “a person is a person through the otherness of other human beings”). The philosophy affirms one’s humanity by recognising the humanity of others, the focus being communal identity, or shared life) (Makgoro, 1998).

<sup>151</sup> Refer also to Carr *et al* (2004) who demonstrate student participation along online communities of practice theory in an Economics class.

and online. This is also similar to Santos's ESL writing class at Aloha University, which was designed around COP principles, as described by Warschauer (2002c)<sup>152</sup>.

The aim in this data analysis chapter is to examine the extent to which participants engage in online communities of practice. I suggest that participants interact in diverse communities simultaneously. Here I look at key elements of communities of practice, as established by Lave and Wenger (1991, 1996, 2002): relationships, peripherality and participation. I examine these issues simultaneously within the types of communities that evolved in my online class. I have categorised the communities as overlapping sub-communities, which I call:

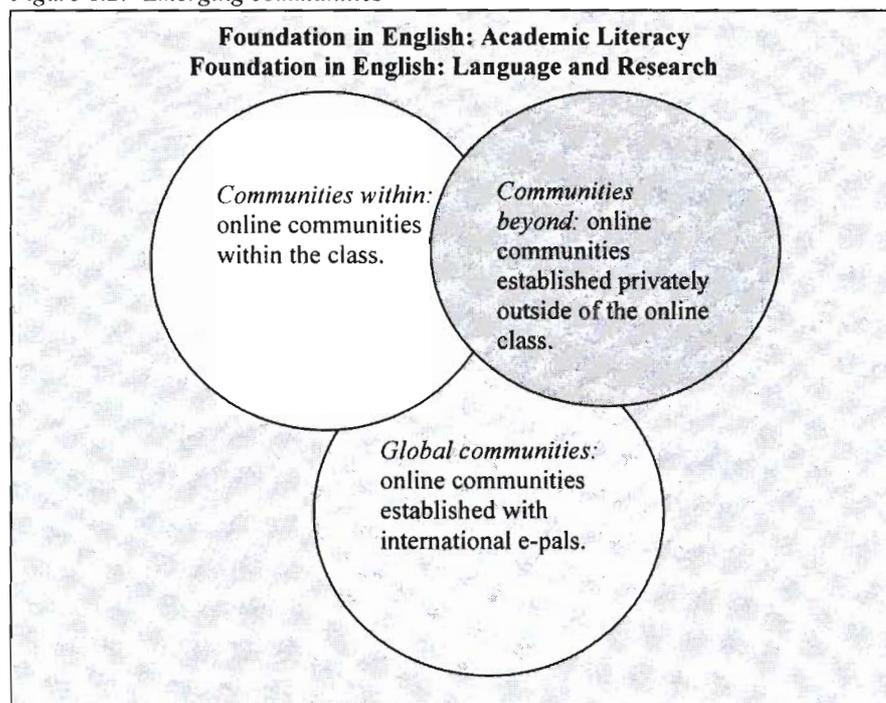
- *communities within*, which refer to public networks and interaction created in the online class among participants, including myself as the facilitator;
- *communities beyond*, which refer to the online communication and interactions which arose outside of the online class, and which involved participants communicating online privately with one another, and excluding the facilitator;
- *global communities*, which refer to the global networks established by some of the participants who communicated with international e-pals.

Figure 6.2 overleaf is a diagrammatic representation of the three observable, overlapping communities within the online class:

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<sup>152</sup> Santos (in Warschauer, 2002c) supported student learning by using computer-assisted classroom discussion, and encouraged student participation on e-mail discussion listservs. She approached her writing class as a form of apprenticeship, where she drew students into a new academic discourse community, characterized by legitimate peripheral participation principles.

Figure 6.2: Emerging communities



The circles in Figure 6.2 are not meant to suggest that participants engaged in the three communities in isolation. The communities evolved simultaneously. Furthermore, not all the students participated in all three communities, thirteen participated in communities within and beyond, while four participated in global communities.

I suggest that participants interact in various communities on the basis of the relationships they establish, and that these relationships determine the extent of their participation. Also the notion of 'old-timers, new-comers' is not just a physical one, because of the 'new' students who joined the class in Semester Two<sup>153</sup>. New Semester Two students, in some cases adapted to the online environments more readily, unlike some of the students who had been in the class from Semester One. Hence the notion 'old-timers-new comers' is not meant to be considered a physical distinction. Students who displayed characteristics of independence and initiative were more accepting of

<sup>153</sup> Please refer to description of the student sample in Chapter 4.

the online environment. In the sections that follow I examine the three emerging communities.

### **6.3 Communities within: Public lives**

In this section I explore the first community that emerged in the online environment: the interactions, relationships and networks created in the online class between participants and myself, and among the participants themselves. Hildreth, Kimble and Wright (1998, 2000) are concerned with the stories and narrations that are used in a community, resulting in the transition from novice to expert. As novices' stories become accepted into the community, they become legitimate members of that community. I found that as the participants became more familiar with the online medium, having sought help from their peers or me, they became more active in the process and in the extent of their communication with us. In the section to follow I examine how participants' online relationships emerged.

#### *6.3.1 Emerging relationships; diminishing boundaries*

Lally and Barrett's (1999) study of transactional distance in online environments focused on the use of CMC in a distance education M.Ed Programme. In their study they found that CMC reduced transactional distance among tutors and students, which resulted in more active participation in the online environment.

I felt that, to a certain extent, social distance had already been reduced because of the face-to-face contact we had already established. However, in order for participants not to feel threatened by the new medium, as well as to set the tone of the online class, my

postings were quite conversational and informal<sup>154</sup>. For instance, introductory messages at the beginning of each semester were by nature casual, and informative, in order to ensure that participants did not feel threatened by the new medium. Figures 6.3.1.1 and 6.3.1.2 are introductory notes posted at the beginning of Semesters One and Two respectively:

*Figure 6.3.1.1: Semester One introductory posting*

**FROM:** Leila  
**SUBJECT:** Welcome  
[\[Reply\]](#) | [Archive](#) | [Delete](#) | [Forward](#)

Hi All, and welcome to the Foundation 124/6 Nicenet class. This may be a new experience to most of you, but I promise, a rewarding one! The intention of the class is to help us to communicate on a more regular basis. You may participate via the 'conference' button. Notes and answers to assignments will also be posted regularly. Please feel free to contact me should you experience problems at any time, and use your class Nicenet handout as a guide until you get used to the system.

Should you continue with the course next semester (AELS 126) you may still use this virtual class.

Please drop me a note when you get this message so that I may see whether the system is working well.

Bye for now, happy chatting, Leila:-)

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<sup>154</sup> This is also in keeping with Cope and Kalantzis' (1993) principles of critical pedagogy. The principle of creation of an environment, where the learner is secure and the teacher in an authoritative role, bears reference.

*Figure 6.3.1.2: Semester Two introductory posting*

**FROM:** Leila  
**SUBJECT:** Greetings: Research Module  
[Reply | Archive | Delete | Forward]

Hello All  
Welcome back to "old" and "new" students. I am using the same online class so that you do not have to re-register. Hooray! This is an exciting time for us all, especially to those of you who are doing research for the first time. Remember, I am here to guide you along. Make full use of our site for the following:

Messages: messages from me and fellow students  
Documents: Handouts and summaries  
Conferencing: weekly discussions and opportunities for questions and debate. Every student is required to post one question or comment each week.  
Links: other sites of interest – Make new friends, check out the e-pal site in China here! See your e-pals!

I also include tips on assignments and exams, so check this class regularly.

So...log on soon, students have found this site to be really valuable.

Cheers, leila ;-)

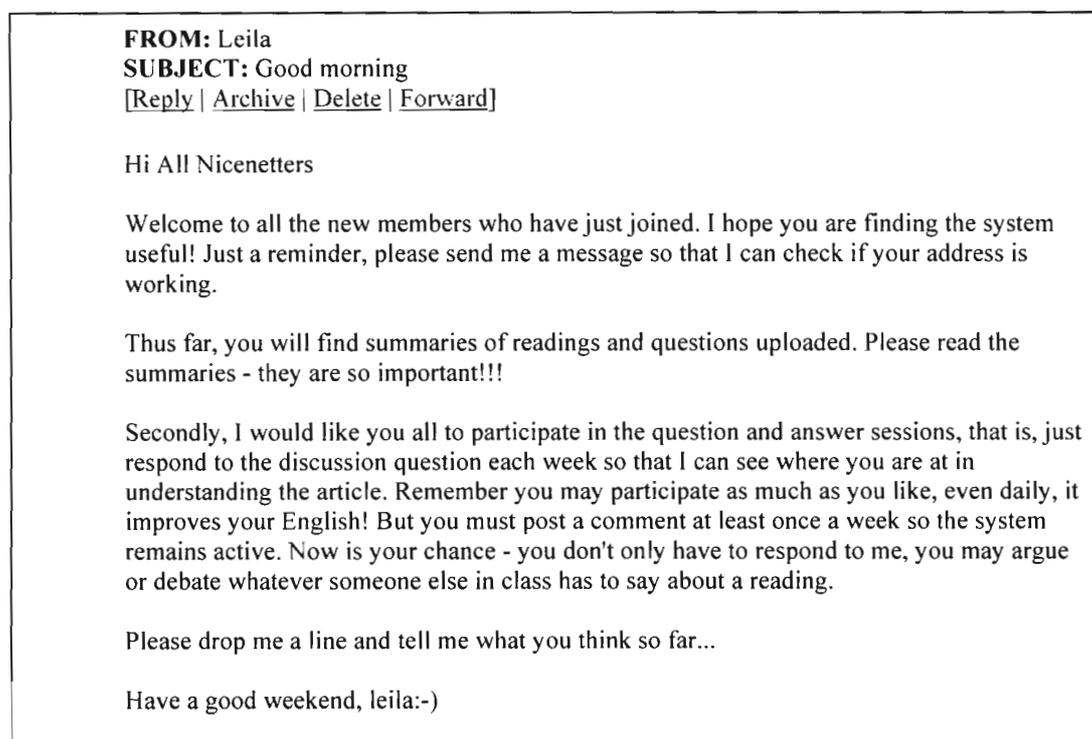
Although I requested that students submit one question or comment per week, this did not always occur. It should be noted at this point that participants were not rewarded, for instance, with marks, for participation, and all participation was voluntary. An early journal entry describes my feelings at the time:

*Figure 6.3.1.3: Teacher journal (12 May 2004)*

Am feeling slightly de-motivated. Students not very active. If they don't participate regularly, how far can I go in motivating them?

I found that I needed to send additional messages during the course of the weeks to sustain the momentum of the online class component, especially when I found participation lagging. An example follows in Figure 6.3.1.4:

Figure 6.3.1.4: Motivating messages



The above is also consistent with Nunan's (in Kahmi-Stein, 2000) findings, where he found that the facilitator is, in the initial stages of an online class, far more active than the student-participants. This could also be attributed to student motivation. Kannan and MackNish's (2000) study of an online test-taking skills course in Singapore, for instance, further reveals that there are four stages of motivation in online environments: apprehension (because of fear of the unknown), curiosity (familiarization because of training, assistance and peer presence), peak stage (where students find the work interesting and pleasant), and the fall stage (where students start to find the exercises too similar and they start to lose interest). I observed similar tendencies among my students. As they began to feel more comfortable with the technology, they began to participate more vigorously online, until they became distracted and, in some cases, like that of Xing and Oscar, lost interest because the postings were not updated daily<sup>155</sup>.

<sup>155</sup> Please refer to their comments in Chapter 5.

The nature of the discourse appeared to encourage participants to communicate in exchanges more freely. Lucky, one of the participants, felt that the nature of our online communication enabled him to feel comfortable with the medium. He felt that the relaxed tone of the postings and greetings gave him a sense that he was “part of the class” (14.9.2004). In an informal conversation, Herman also expressed surprise at the sense of community. He said he felt that online communication does not have to be “remote” (22.8.2004). This view is also consistent with Cunningham’s (2000) findings on the study of the attitudes of Japanese EFL students towards online learning. The participants in his study found the use of ICT non-threatening and challenging in the teaching-learning environment. The view is contrary to the feelings experienced by Czerniewicz (2001), in South Africa, however, who found her online class an isolating experience.

I also found that the tone of the messages encouraged members who were peripheral participants to respond and to start posting their own messages on the online class. Adam provided confirmed this view when he said that initially he only read what others had to say. Later, he too started to post messages because he said it appeared quite uncomplicated to do. Although Adam was a student who joined the class in the second semester, he began to participate in the class much sooner than some of the students who were in the class from the first semester, demonstrating that the ‘old timer-new comer’ notion is not necessarily a physical one. Adam also assisted other students when they had problems with the site.

Participants in this study told their stories, both online, and during interviews, of how they became part of the community. First, I will look at the contact participants had

with me, as well as the kinds of communication that evolved. Thereafter I will look at the interactions they had with other participants.

### 6.3.2 *Interactions with the facilitator*

Participants' views on their interactions with the facilitator in the online environment were encouraging. All the participants, even those who did not participate in the online class felt that the online class provided, or had the potential to provide extended contact with the lecturer. Herman, Mabela, Leonard, Sibon, Xing, Oscar, Musa, Ernest, Blessing and Mbali felt that the use of online communication facilitated access and ease of communication. Herman said: "Yes, it provides easy access, you don't have to always... don't disturb the lecturer, sometimes it's not consultation time (22. 8. 2004).

Students are given set times during which they may consult with lecturers. If they are not available at those times, for instance, if they have other classes, they attempt to see lecturers outside of the consultation times. Hence, Herman's comment about disturbing lecturers is appropriate. Mabela added that it was a convenient medium to use. Together with easy access, participants Farzana and Nothando also felt that it opened up learning opportunities if students had questions and lecturers were not physically available. Adam felt that writing out a message or question gave him time to formulate his message, whereas in class, he felt he sometimes could not express the question clearly. He said:

*Adam:* For sure, like sometimes I may not be able to talk to you the way I can on the computer. I have time to think about what I have to say. I can express it better than face-to-face. Sometimes I may run short of words...not know how to put it. On the computer you are alone you have time to get the words (15.9.2004)<sup>156</sup>.

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<sup>156</sup> As mentioned in the previous section, Adam is a student who joined the online class in Semester Two.

Although we did not know each other very well at the beginning of the semester, Adam enquired about the online class because he had heard about it from other students who were in my class in Semester One. He also sometimes came in to see me about personal problems he was experiencing during the second semester, for instance, on one occasion when he missed class for a few sessions because of a family funeral. So although he might have felt that he was better able to express himself online, this was not the only medium he used, and we did chat face-to-face during consultation sessions as well.

Precious commented that online communication is beneficial because, as new students, they often felt nervous to approach a lecturer, and that the e-mail helped relieve their nervousness. I noticed student hesitation when I recommended that they make appointments to see me about their work, or for 'one-on-one' consultations. Often, they thought they were being 'singled out to see the teacher' because they were not doing well in class. Other participants also said that the online medium helped them keep in touch and that there was less distance between the lecturer and students, which was also a finding in Lally and Barrett's (1999) study on social distance among distance Education students.

Nothando commented on the diminishing boundaries:

Yes, there is no boundary between the class and the lecturer. You can learn all the time. But on the other hand we must also not become a nuisance. Lecturers are busy. They can't reply...only if it is necessary to our work (16.9.2004).

In Lucky's view:

Yes, it becomes....to become used to the lecturer. Because when I get the questions there, like the discussion questions you ask, it will make me relate it to the lecturer. And it is casual, like a class discussion, the greetings...asking how we are ...sometimes lecturers don't do this...it is like business straight (14.9.2004).

Lucky's view is that the online class presents a more collegial, collaborative environment, unlike in some classes that are more business-like and work-focused.

Yet other participants cautioned that it was still necessary to have face-to-face contact with lecturers, and that online communication alone was unsuitable. In Hara and Kling's (1999) qualitative study of a web-based distance study course, they found that students got frustrated having only e-mail contact because the feedback was not immediate. Their students also sometimes had difficulty accessing information from the Net. Vague and ambiguous instructions from the instructor added to their frustrations. Leonard felt:

Yes, it does help you must stay in touch (physically). You feel you get to know the lecturer as not someone only in class because you have some means of communication (14.9.2004).

Mbali and Zinhle were of a similar view, they felt that face-to-face contact was preferable in a university context.

Therefore, certain participants felt that the online medium improved communication between facilitator and students, while others felt that face-to-face contact was still vital in the teaching-learning context. In the following section I explore the different kinds of online communication that emerged.

#### *6.3.2.1 Emerging modes of communication*

The kinds of student-facilitator communication ranged from work-related issues to personal requests. In addition to posting summaries of class readings, I also posted hints on writing essays and advice on writing exams. The posting on examination preparation in Semester Two was as follows:

Figure 6.3.2.1.1: Examination preparation

**FROM:** Leila  
**SUBJECT:** Exams!!!  
[Reply | Archive | Delete | Forward]

Hi All  
It's Friday - last day of lectures! Hooray! I'm sure you're all waiting to hear the structure of the paper. Here goes:

1. Comprehending a text - general questions (like the reading assignment). You must have read the article very well beforehand because you can't waste time reading in the exam for the first time! Use your own words and only quote if necessary. **30 marks**
2. Proposal: you will be given a topic to write the proposal on, based somewhat on the article. Sub headings will be given. Be sure to follow the mark scheme and make sure too that you UNDERSTAND the question! Or else you may find it difficult. Ask yourself- what is the proposal about? What is my research question? What is my site, sample and research method? Try this with other topics when you revise and have someone check it for you. **30 marks**
3. Data analysis: Two sections: Quantitative analysis: Graphs, tables. You will be given data to analyse. **20 marks**

Qualitative analysis. You will be given extracts of data. You will have to analyse it qualitatively. Remember your categories and supporting evidence! **20 marks**

Take your time, and study well! Remember to check the notice board when marks are displayed in October. Please report any discrepancies to me. Make an appointment should you require any additional help.

**EXAM:** Arrive early. Make sure you know the venue. ...Carry enough stationery. ...Switch off cell phones.....

THEN TAKE A DEEP BREATH, CLEAR YOUR MIND...BEGIN.  
You have been a wonderful class. I thoroughly enjoyed the time we spent together and have delighted in seeing so many of you develop and shine! I know I set high standards, but varsity isn't for those who don't want to achieve. As E... would say – "Let's be professional!" I wish you well in all your exams and in the future! Keep in touch and go well!!

leila:-)

In Johnson and Huff's (2000) categorisation of student messages in computer-mediated environments, they found that the messages consisted of general housekeeping issues such as assignment extensions and due dates, as well as questions about assignments, technical problems, requests for assistance and evaluative feedback. I too found similar postings in my research, including what I call work-related issues and personal requests. The following extracts from student postings appear as is and grammatical and other errors have not been corrected. I received

several queries about research projects, research updates, requests, and personal messages during the course of the year:

Figure 6.3.1.1.2: Research query 1

**FROM:** E.....  
**SUBJECT:** can you please help me on this  
[Reply Again | Archive | Delete | Forward]

i have experiencing problem in creating my own pie chart, so i was wondering if you coul help me some other time. please make to be convenient to you because i do not want to disturb your work. thank you

Figure 6.3.1.1.3: Research query 2

**FROM:** B.....  
**SUBJECT:**  
[Reply | Archive | Delete | Forward]

Hi. How u? Can u please tell me is it fine if u put a graph in the section Methodolgy?

Thank YoU!!!  
B.....

Students also provided me with regular updates on the progress they were making on their research projects. The research component of the course excited students because it was the first time any of them were conducting field research. Their projects included language use at a local police station, language policy at the SABC<sup>157</sup>, naming practices, nicknames, and common themes and languages used in *kwaito*<sup>158</sup> and rap music.

<sup>157</sup> SABC – South African Braodcasting Corporation.

<sup>158</sup> *Kwaito* is a genre of music that originated in the townships in South African, and is popular among the youth. It is a fusion of American hip hop, African sounds, and *tsotsitaal* (township slang).

Figure 6.3.1.1.4: Research update 1

**FROM:** E.....  
**SUBJECT:** Project up date.  
[\[Reply\]](#) | [\[Archive\]](#) | [\[Delete\]](#) | [\[Forward\]](#)

Hello Leila, I would like to thank you again for the advises you gave to us on how to keep our groups effective. My project consist of three members if you can recall, I thought it was going to be hectic since other groups have 4 members. I could not believe it when we coped very well just like other groups. D.... also encouraged us and assisted where we had problems.

Last week we were doing face to face interviews, this is one part of the research I like most. As our Topic is naming practices, we went all the way interviewing Wits students on how they feel about their names including nicknames. It was very funny and we really learned a lot. Out of 10 interviewees, can you believe that all of them had nicknames? I never expected that.

The research took some efforts and commitments from group members, as we had to make time and visit students in their residences especially at night. This is because we are about to write our exams as a result every student we found in the campus was just as busy as a bee.

At least we now done, the only thing left for us is to do presentations!

Thank you very much for reading this e-mail.  
Your sincerely:  
E...

Figure 6.3.1.1.5: Research update 2

**FROM:** O...  
**SUBJECT:** RE: Good morning  
[\[Reply\]](#) | [\[Archive\]](#) | [\[Delete\]](#) | [\[Forward\]](#)

I just want to thank you for helping much in our projects. you are such a caring mother. yesterday we manage to go to Jorburg central police and we met a cooperating wonderful lady who promised us that our letter will not be delayed any longer.  
thank you o...

The letter referred to by O in Figure 6.3.1.1.5 was one I had to write requesting permission for the group to conduct research observations and interviews at a very busy police station in central Johannesburg. The group was investigating language use at the police station where queries were often made in a variety of mother tongues. Just before this message was posted the group was frustrated that their original letter requesting permission to conduct research was lost at the police station, and I had to intervene to assist them.

Participants also used the online medium to make appointments and for personal requests, as the following two figures show:

*Figure 6.3.1.1.6: Student query 1*

**FROM:** A...  
**SUBJECT:**  
[Reply | Archive | Delete | Forward]  
hi leila it's A... just dropping you a line to show you that my line is working. i also need to know how busy will we be on friday because on saturday there is unveiling @ home and if i don't leave on friday then i will leave on saturday but i'll arrive late and i would have missed the purpose

*Figure 6.3.1.1.7: Student query 2*

**FROM:** M.....  
**SUBJECT:** appointment for meeting  
[Reply | Archive | Delete | Forward]  
leila, i just read your message today so i was just wodering if we could meet tomorrow at 10hoo because today i am going to attend assesment. I will further like to thank you for your undivided attention you give our class. i wish you the best of luck for the future. thank you

Finally, the class was also used as a vehicle for personal messages, examples of which follow:

*Figure 6.3.1.1.8: Personal message 1*

**FROM:** E...  
**SUBJECT:** A GRATTITUDE  
[Reply | Archive | Delete | Forward]  
  
\*\*Hie Leila\*\* on behalf of everyone in ma class who share dis with me, I would like 2 thank u 4 all the effort u put towards our success fm the biggining till nou.thus, i wish u all the best in dis festive season & keep up the gud work.//\*\*  
  
<<// Thank you//>>

Figure 6.3.1.1.9: Personal message 2

**FROM:** B...  
**SUBJECT:**  
[Reply | Archive | Delete | Forward]

Dear leila

Thank you for your support through out the whole year. I feel that Applies English helps me a lot in all my subjects, I will probably do it on next year as well.  
Thank you for teaching us!  
Best Wishes to you  
Kindly regards  
B.....

On the whole, the Figures reveal that students used the online medium as an alternative to face-to-face contact, and for online socialisation. In AELS we have large student numbers at first year level, and sometimes academics find it difficult to cope in consultation times with the number of students who have queries. I found that online requests and queries relieved me to have more consultation time with students who were experiencing more serious difficulties, such as failing grades. The personal messages and use of language reveal that students acknowledged the medium as a means of social contact and virtual intimacy. In this regard, Yates (1996:129) makes reference to online “imagined communities”, and Moran and Hawisher (1998:88) add that the online medium helps create the “illusion of intimacy”. Moran and Hawisher (1998) also cite studies of “warmth” in online communication, ranging from students who “chat away like old friends” on listservs, to virtual dating and virtual sex<sup>159</sup>.

### 6.3.2.2 Online language use

In relation to literacy and language use, the written text has long been regarded as unchanging, permanent, and static in nature, while speech is considered more transient and dynamic (Horne and Heinemann, 2003). Because of its permanent

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<sup>159</sup> Moran and Hawisher (1998) cite studies by Deuel (1996), Selfe and Meyer (1991), Wilkens (1991), and Gelder (1991).

nature, writing tends to be accorded higher status, which carries greater weight and authority, than speech (refer also to Derrida in Yates, 1996). Examinations of CMC show that the medium presents both oral and written linguistic features (Ong, 1982 in Murray, 2000; Yates, 1996; Crystal, 2001; Moran and Hawisher, 1998). Warschauer (2004a: 5) and Murray (2000:402) say that CMC users employ time-reducing strategies to write the message and substitute for the lack of paralinguistic and non-verbal cues. Figure 6.3.2.2 that follows illustrates the linguistic strategies adopted by participants using CMC, as well as examples as they occurred in the messages posted in my study:

*Figure 6.3.2.2: Linguistic strategies and features used in computer-mediated communication*

<b>Linguistic strategies identified by Murray (2000) and Warschauer (2004a)</b>	<b>Sample Figures</b>	<b>Example of participant strategies</b>
The use of abbreviations and acronyms, repeated letters and punctuation, such as 'F2F' for face-to-face, and 'Hey!!!!' for prosodic effect.	Figure 6.1.1.3	U (you); Thank YoU!!!
Simplified syntax, informal language.	Figure 6.1.1.3 Figure 6.3.1.1.8	How u? Ma (my), dis (this), 2 (to), u (you), 4 (for)
The acceptance of surface errors, such as typographical and spelling errors.	Figure 6.3.1.1.2 Figure 6.3.1.1.5 Figure 6.3.1.1.6 Figure 6.3.1.1.7 Figure 6.3.1.1.9	I have experiencing problem... ...Coperating lady... Run-on sentence I was wodering... ...probally...
The use of symbols to express emotional meaning, such as multiple vowels and consonants, or emoticons, such as aaaah, or ☺.	Figure 6.3.1.1.8	// * <<>> Hie
Reduced capitalisation.	Figure 6.3.1.1.2 Figure 6.3.1.1.6 Figure 6.3.1.1.7 Figure 6.3.1.1.8	For example, Figure 6.3.1.1.2 "leila, i just read your message today so i was wodering..."

From the extracts provided, it is evident that the CMC messages have taken on the characteristics of speech and writing, creating a hybrid text. E, in Figure 6.3.1.1.8 Extract 12, for instance, uses asterisks (\*\*) and slashes (/) in the absence of social cues. His use of punctuation creates a sense of the non-verbal. It could be that E has

not yet acquired the use of emoticons, and is trying to emulate their use. Abdullah (2001b) also found that participants from different countries in an online conference used such cues to position themselves as a social presence. Horne and Heinemann (2003) further discuss language use in their study of the language used in chat rooms, where participants “seem to write as they speak, without paying much attention to spelling, punctuation, and layout” (Horne and Heinemann, 2003:119). The messages are transient, and interactive, like speech, in the sense that they rely on feedback, although not as simultaneously as in synchronous communication modes. It is also evident from participants’ casual use of discourse, such as their use of symbols, emoticons and contractions, for example “4” for four, “dis” for this, “gud” for good, “ma” for my, and “u” for you, that they are engaging in a medium that might be considered a hybrid of written and spoken language (Yates, 1996). This discussion is resumed in the section on identities later in this chapter.

One of the concerns around CMC is that writing changes in the electronic medium, and questions might be asked whether these changes are beneficial or harmful to writing. As mentioned in Chapter 5, when asked by Ancker (2002) for his views on the possibility of CMC-writing debasing language, Warschauer said he equated the possibility to conversation debasing language. His views are that teachers should use the Net to match pedagogical goals, and that the use of emoticons and other features of CMC should be considered a different register, which might be used in the classroom as language exercises. Warschauer’s (2001) view, which I agree with, is that CMC can actually help serve as a bridge between speaking and writing, by facilitating L2 interaction “that is linguistically complex yet informal and communicative” (Warschauer, 2001: online, page 2 of 8).

Having examined the contact established between participants and the facilitator, as well as analysed some of the postings linguistically, in the section that follows, I shift to look at the interactions between the student participants.

### 6.3.3 *Interactions and contact among students: “We are all connected. We are all together”*<sup>160</sup>

Participants had specific views on their interactions with other student-participants.

Precious’ comments summed up the possibilities for student contact:

- Precious:* It’s also much easier because you can’t get to see each one in class.  
*Leila:* Is everyone communicating like this? Online?  
*Precious:* Ja, they do, everyone...  
*Leila:* Oh...so the class helped?  
*Precious:* Definitely. It did. We didn’t know these things before.  
*Leila:* Did you learn new things from *Nicenet*?  
*Precious:* How to communicate with the whole class. We are all connected. We are all together.  
*Leila:* Was it hard to do?  
*Precious:* No, not hard, just different. The instructions were very easy to follow (13.9.2004).

Generally, the majority of the participants felt that online communication increased possibilities for contact with other students:

- Lucky:* Yes, it also increased communication with other students, because you find if we can talk about something in the Internet, you know it can make us speak about it again in class when we have a few minutes break.  
*Leila:* Did you communicate with other students via the *Nicenet* class or privately?  
*Lucky:* It was privately ...so no one else can read it (14.9.2004).

Lucky’s interesting response about private communication will be taken up in the section *Communities beyond*, which examines interactions in which participants communicated outside of the online class. Xing cast a reminder that student-student communication is only facilitated if all students are technologically active:

I think it helps to communicate this way. Sometimes you need to get in touch with someone, but it is only possible if every body gets more technological, right? You must check your mail regularly (14.9.2004).

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<sup>160</sup> Precious, 13.9.2004.

Xing often expressed the need for everyone to be involved. He wanted to use technology to its fullest, but felt that other students in class were not showing enough of an interest. It was only as participants began to feel less ‘technophobic’ that they began to participate more actively online. Elsie is a good example of the move from peripheral to central participation. Initially, she was afraid of computers, and could not even log on with her password. Later, she began to feel more empowered as she gained skills with the assistance of others in class. She participated peripherally, and with assistance from other participants in class, including myself, she became quite active online, even initiating discussion questions, demonstrating the existence of a community of practice. She said:

The first semester students they taught the new students and passed it on, or someone who knew..like P... taught me and we all got the ability (16.9.2004).

Thus, participants felt a ‘connection’ to one another in the online class. They realised, through their interactions, that there were possibilities for communication using the online medium. The implications of these interactions for classroom communication, is elaborated on in the next section.

### *6.3.3.1 Further possibilities for communication: From the classroom to the virtual classroom “ It’s not only a class...faces in the class ”<sup>161</sup>*

Students such as Elsie and Adam saw that online communication helped students get to know one another and form relationships:

*Elsie:* Yes, I communicated with O... the first time. It started there, and so it continued. It’s a good thing to do. It makes you feel like its not only a class...faces in the class. You get to know people (16.9.2004).  
*Adam:* Even in class you can have great friendships, you get that chance to make it better. Get to know people (14.9.2004).

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<sup>161</sup> Elsie, 16.9.2004.

Elsie continued that the environment was not stressful:

*Elsie:* What I learnt new? For me, everything. All new. I think our class was united, unlike a lecture room, everyone got on. The first semester students they taught the new students and passed it on, or someone who knew..like P... taught me and we all got the ability. You feel free to put down what you feel. No tension. Like when we were doing polygamy and we had to do a presentation, and O... says there is nothing wrong with polygamy, it's our culture. I really like that. In class and on the Internet (16.9.2004).

Elsie's interpretation of the stress-free environment is probably as a result of her feeling more comfortable and confident in the medium. Earlier in the Semester the environment definitely intimidated her.

The lack of immediate feedback was of concern to Zinhle, which was also a finding in the Hara and Kling's (1999) study cited earlier:

*Zinhle:* It is good to use it for communication. But it is more easy to see the people you communicate with. You remember things and get more information. And you get answers face-to-face. Like sometimes you want to ask something and the person may take a long time to respond.

*Leila:* Ja, feedback.

*Zinhle:* In class they answer same time. When I answer they can also question same time face-to-face (15.9.2004).

Therefore, a few participants, such as Mabela, felt that face-to-face communication was still beneficial to student contact:

*Mabela:* I normally don't like this...Personally, I don't like to e-mail students. I feel I don't have to because I see them every day. Some people send useless things on the e-mail (14.9.2004).

Mabela is referring to the jokes that were sent around online. He found these of little value, however, these jokes could sometimes help participants bond. Leonard and Sibbo were also concerned that many students used online communication unnecessarily, and that there should be more constructive reasons for doing so:

*Leonard:* Yes, it's true. It improves communication, but you must use it for a reason, not to waste time (14.9.2004).

*Sibbo:* This is not something I would do just for fun, only if it is necessary to keep in contact. Then there are possibilities beyond the classroom (14.9.2004).

In relation to maintaining contact, some of the participants' messages indicate that they were beginning to see the class as a collaborative community, in which participants communicate, negotiate meaning and develop relationships. This is indicative of Warschauer's (1996a) study of electronic and face-to-face classrooms in Hawa'ii, which showed that students are able to collaborate and maintain contact effectively in online environments. The antithesis, however, is Davey's (2001) study, the focus of which was contact and collaboration among Japanese EFL students on web-page projects. Davey (2001) found that the students experienced difficulty maintaining contact and collaborating on the projects, like Xing and Oscar in this study. The messages that were posted in the online class are indicative of the relationships that emerged among the student-participants. Many of them were 'feel-good' messages, as the following Figure shows:

*Figure 6.3.3.1.1: Student 'feel-good' messages*

**FROM:** I...  
**SUBJECT:** hi to everyone!  
[\[Reply Again\]](#) | [Archive](#) | [Delete](#) | [Forward](#)  
i just like to wish a good examination period to everyone in our class, and i hope we are all doing to well, but the only solution is to put more effort on our study.... thank you.  
I...

**FROM:** L...  
**SUBJECT:** good wishes for your exams  
[\[Reply\]](#) | [Archive](#) | [Delete](#) | [Forward](#)  
  
ladies and gents, i am very blessed to know you. so i would to wish you all the best for your exams and future. please take care.

**FROM:** B...  
**SUBJECT:** Good luck for the exams  
[\[Reply\]](#) | [Archive](#) | [Delete](#) | [Forward](#)  
  
Hi all!  
It is wonderful to meet you guys, every minute to be with you will be the most beautiful moments in my life. Thank you very much!  
Best wishes for your exams and future! I know you all can make it!  
B...☺

As discussed earlier in the section on *Online language use*, student interactions indicate the narrowing of the gap between speech and writing. In the face-to-face tutorial, students would say “Good luck” in wishing one another well in the examination. In online communication, the use of “ladies and gents” (Figure 6.3.3.1.1) assumes the genre of formal speech making, while “blessed to know you” (Figure 6.3.3.1.1) has almost spiritual undertones, and appears to be inconsistent with the tone of online communication. However, the use of inappropriate tone appears to be adopted by several participants, perhaps because of initial discomfort with the medium. B’s use of “most beautiful moments in my life” is reminiscent of the poetic, cliched discourse of greeting-cards, and is also not compliant with normal face-to-face greetings. B also emulated my often-used greeting of “Hi all!” and closed with a smiley, indicating his emulation of the genre of online writing, as well as his growing comfort and confidence with the online medium. Such messages further indicate that participants were beginning to feel comfortable, and were beginning to bond with one another online, even though they were using inappropriate tone.

The issue of netiquette surfaced in a minor form, when participants used the online class to discuss other lecturers. Here I had to caution participants to discuss issues, rather than a particular lecturer:

Figure 6.3.3.1.2: Issues around netiquette

**FROM:** O...  
**SUBJECT:** The lecture today  
[Reply | Archive | Delete | Forward]

How was our (name removed) lecture?  
I enjoyed it so much But I think it was just too fast and our lecturer hurried through out the whole thing,however it made some sence I think it was going to be much better,if we had time.

So you guys how far have you gone with your Oral presentation and what topics are you dealing with.We are dealing with Polygamy if you have some ideas on polygamy I think you should help us.If you have anything to debate about polygamy please write me.I am for polygamy bearing in mind among other things that polygamy is resistance to catural imperialism.At least those who practice it have catural values that they are still keeping.Although thesedays it is a total greedness of women.But I think also it is justified since males are fewer than females for example here at Wits.Say we have a community like this University else where. What would those un lick ones do if they have no men to love them.You know women and men need someone to give loveor vise-versa. If you have any options air them to me. thank you O...

In the above instance, the students felt that a particular lecture was quite long and rushed, and they indicated that they did not enjoy it as much as other lectures. The lecturer also felt that she did not have sufficient time to cover as much as she would have liked, although, this was her own conclusion, and not one she made as a result of the online discussion. Although not an example of flaming, or online insult, I did not want the online class to evolve into sessions that were critical of individuals, rather I preferred that participants focused on class issues. I also realised that such discussions were inevitable among students, and were very much part of the face-to-face class as well, so it is interesting that the statement was made public by posting it on online class.

Figure 6.3.3.1.2 also shows the kind of discussion participants engaged in. I refer to this extract again in the section on identities to discuss issues surrounding how the participant positions himself in relation to the theme of polygamy. Because of the dynamic nature of the different discussion forums and threads that were evolving simultaneously, as well as the fact that some of them were private discussions, it was

problematic to copy all the threads hence I have only selected a few relevant interactions as illustrative examples.

The composition of the Foundation in English course encourages critical engagement with course readings. Initially participants engaged in more face-to-face discussion than online discussion. As stated earlier in this chapter, some of the participants commented that it is easier to debate issues physically and that it took too much time to debate online, and wait for an answer. Others, like Elsie, took to online discussion, however, some of the debates were private, and not open to the whole class, as is shown later in the section entitled *Communities beyond*. Discussions also showed specific patterns of turn taking. In response to the polygamy posting in Figure 6.3.3.1.2, the following extract shows some of the responses that were posted:

Figure 6.3.3.1.3: Responses to O's polygamy posting

**FROM:** A....  
**SUBJECT:** re: The lecture today  
[\[Reply\]](#) | [Archive](#) | [Delete](#) | [Forward](#)  
My grandfather had three wives. It is good for the family and according to customary law it is right. But what if the economy is bad like now? How can he provide? I cannot afford many wives or girlfriends!

**FROM:** B....  
**SUBJECT:** re:The lecture today  
[\[Reply\]](#) | [Archive](#) | [Delete](#) | [Forward](#)  
Polygamy adds to HIV/AIDS – a man with many wives will spread the disease to the wives and children. In my township there are too many aids orphans. Who will look after them? We need one man-one wife.

**FROM:**M....  
**SUBJECT:** Polygamy  
[\[Reply\]](#) | [Archive](#) | [Delete](#) | [Forward](#)  
I am studying to support myself when I work. I don't need a man to support me. My mother, aunts and my grandmother needed a mans support. I can do it myself. Isithembu (*Zulu word for polygamy – my addition*) is not for the modern man and woman.

**FROM:**O...  
**SUBJECT:** Re: Polygamy  
[\[Reply\]](#) | [Archive](#) | [Delete](#) | [Forward](#)  
You can always say you are so independent but even you can have love.what you say you can lose the tradition?will your child know?  
o...

From the previous extracts it is clear that participants engaged in both face-to-face and public online discussions, similar to turn taking in Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) early work on the initiation-response-feedback (IRF) pattern of conversational analysis, the only difference being a lapse in time between responses, and the absence of feedback. O, for instance, actually responded two days later to M with his feedback. However, the responses do not appear to be directed to any respondent in particular, and therefore come across as isolated stand-alone messages, rather than conversational strings.

I revisit Figure 6.3.3.1.3 in the section on identities to show how participants positioned themselves in relation to the issues being discussed. I also found that many participants lurked, or appeared to read the summaries and notes provided and ignore the discussions completely. Hence, many of the discussion topics were not well-responded to. For example, my question on multilingualism only received one response. As already stated, I found out that many responses were also being sent privately to individuals, rather than for the class to view. This is discussed in more detail in the next section.

#### **6.4 Communities beyond: Private lives**

About halfway through the online intervention, I found that not all the participants were participating in discussions regularly. My journal entry around that time reflected as such:

*Figure 6.4: Teacher journal (10 August 2004)*

Some of the students are participating in discussion. O, for instance, is contributing regularly. What about the others? What does it say about online COPs if students don't discuss issues around the readings, but only read the notes? Need to stimulate some discussion.

To alleviate my concern, I discussed the issue with some of the participants. I covered further ground during the interviews held from August to October 2004. I discovered that they were indeed participating in discussion, but doing so privately. In effect they had created their own private sub-community outside of the class community, hence the name 'communities beyond'. This gave rise to the second of my overlapping circles in Figure 6.2, as introduced earlier in this chapter.

Lucky, as quoted in the previous section, mentioned that he had been contributing to discussions privately. Elsie said that she too participated in private e-mail discussions with other participants quite often as she sometimes felt she was engaged in a debate with them alone, around specific issues, and that not everyone should be involved. Oscar confirmed that several participants had mailed him privately about his comments on polygamy. In Shaw and Polovina's (1999) study of how the Net is affecting teaching and learning in higher education, they found that students were often embarrassed to say if they were experiencing difficulties. I found that during interviews, some participants, for example, Lucky, Elsie, Ernest and Precious, admitted to experiencing difficulties getting started, and said that they initially contributed privately simply because they did not know how to contribute to the group discussion. At that point they did not appear to realize that the objective of the online class was to promote class discussion and communication. They felt awkward that everyone would read what they had to say, until I explained again that this was just like verbal discussions in class. An obvious problem here was retrieving private messages, so I relied on participant feedback on these interactions.

Another type of private communication that emerged involved me as the facilitator, but also arose as a result of the kind of relationships that were established in class. On

reflection, I found my role as facilitator changing as I found myself becoming more personally involved with participants to an extent that exceeded face-to-face involvement, and participants felt they could approach me more easily about personal issues. To illustrate, I present an incident that occurred during the course of the year. Because of the sensitive nature and ethical concerns around the issue I will comment on it without naming the participants, even by pseudonym. I was asked, interestingly, *via* e-mail, to intervene on a particular student's behalf by another student. The concern was that the student was not attending class regularly, and the fear was that he was experiencing personal difficulties, and that he would not pass at the end of the year. I found it interesting that the student who brought up the issue did so using e-mail, and felt it more comfortable to bring up a sensitive issue using the medium. I was able to trace the student under discussion by 'snail mail'<sup>162</sup>, as there was no telephonic contact in his village, which was in a remote area. I found that the student was physically ill because of financial and other problems, and could not afford to attend class. When he returned to class after some intervention, we maintained e-mail contact, and whenever the student needed assistance, he was able to get in touch with me. Despite the work he had to catch up on, the student managed to pass and was very grateful for the intervention. To date, I have not found other researchers' studies to corroborate increased personal involvement as a result of online communication.

In conversations with Ernest, Mbali and Herman about privacy in online environments, the participants had divergent views. Ernest felt that while some participants gave their views in the face-to-face class, he was certain that those who did not talk as much in class also would not engage in discussion online. Mbali felt that this was not always the case, as some of the shy participants could be more free in

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<sup>162</sup> 'Snail mail' refers to the conventional postal service.

the online environment than they were in class. Herman was of a similar opinion. He felt that the online environment gave students who did not always participate in class an equal opportunity to discuss issues. This is in keeping with Lally and Barrett's (1999) and Warschauer's (1996a) findings on the possibilities of online environments to democratize the learning environment. Because this is a qualitative study, I did not record the number of contributions made face-to-face or online in order to ascertain the extent to which the learning environment is democratized. Instead I relied on observations of the class and reports from students.

I found that there was also a divergence from findings made by Warschauer (1996a) and Lally and Barret (1999), which show that participants participate more online, than face-to-face. In my study, participants like Oscar were equally active in the face-to-face class, as well as online, while students such as Nancy and Lindiwe, who were very shy, did not participate to a great extent face-to-face, or at all in the online class. On the other hand, Herman and Ernest were more active online, while Farzana was more active face-to-face than in the online class. Four of the participants expanded their online communication globally, by participating in the international e-pal exchange project, thus forming what I have termed 'global communities', and concluding the third of the overlapping circles presented in Figure 6.2 of this chapter.

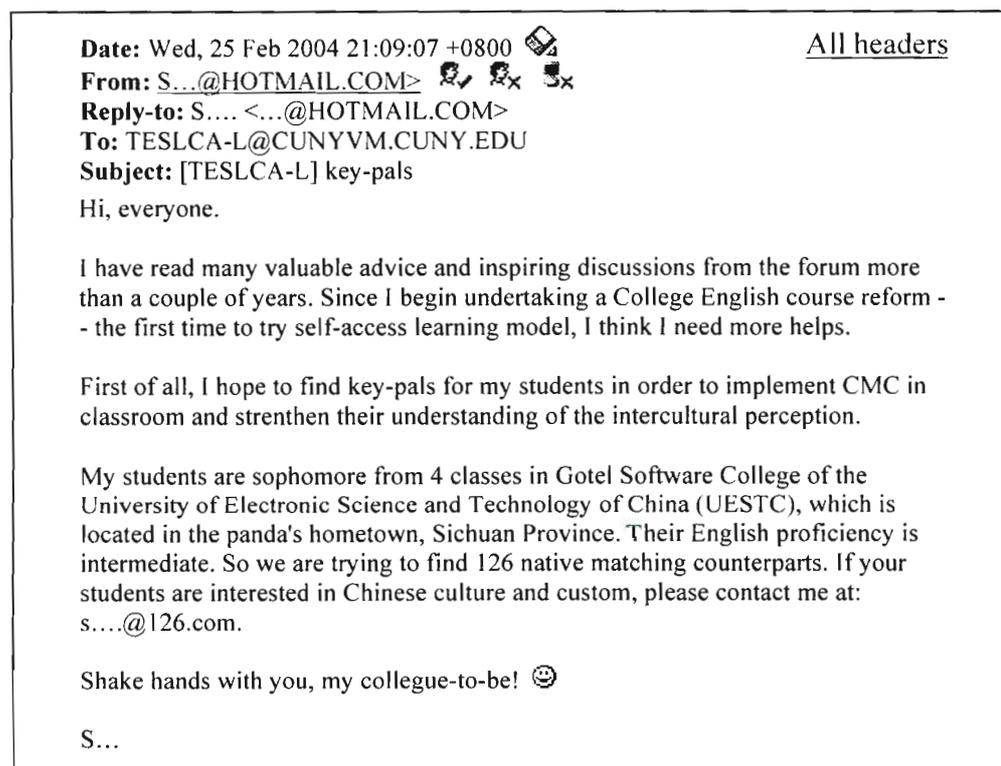
## **6.5 Global communities**

The adage "Think globally, act locally" (Topper, undated: online, page 1 of 4) refers to the need for making and sustaining global connections and communicating with others outside of our communities to broaden our horizons and learning opportunities. Topper continues "Embracing multicultural, multiethnic and multiracial relationships

strengthens the classroom and makes the idea of a global village real to students” (Topper, undated, online, page 2 of 4).

In this section I discuss the expansion of communities of practice into global communities. The section is shaped largely by the pilot study that was conducted at DIT, as reported in Chapter 4. I read a request on the TESLCA-L link for student partnerships from an English teacher in China, who worked with EFL students in higher education. The students attended the Gotel Software College of the University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (UESTC) in Sichuan Province. The teacher’s introductory posting on the TESLCA-L listserv appears below<sup>163</sup>:

Figure 6.5.1: E-pal project request



<sup>163</sup> Please note that none of the e-mail correspondences have been corrected, and that e-mail addresses have been removed to maintain correspondents’ privacy.

I discussed the possibility of intercultural exchange with my students, but unlike the pilot study conducted at DIT, did not focus as strongly on the e-pal exchange programme, for reasons explained in Chapter 4. Having established the interest of some of the participants, I established contact with the teacher. I also requested that we maintain contact to prevent some of the problems I experienced in the pilot project, where participants were left to work independently, and subsequently lost contact. This was detrimental to the pilot project in the sense that many students experienced problems, such as e-pals who did not respond regularly or timeously. The teacher agreed to maintain contact for the same reason. I linked the Chinese class website (<http://englishdiy.nease.net>, last accessed 13 January 2005) to the links section of my *Nicenet* class, where my students were able to access the Chinese students' introductory postings and see photographs of the students, their institution and their hometown. The teacher also asked for my students' contact details so that he could link these to the site as well. I asked them to forward their details to the teacher, and these details were posted on the e-pal page of the partner class.

Only four of the thirteen *Nicenet* participants (Herman, Oscar, Adam and Alex) maintained regular contact in the e-pal project. Others reported that they were interested in the project, but that technical problems, such as incorrect e-mail addresses, and e-pals who did not respond to their messages, were deterrents, as I found in the pilot study as well. This occurred despite the contact maintained by the teacher and myself. Because the project was voluntary and because not all the students were participating in the *Nicenet* class, I did not integrate it with an assessment task, despite my findings in the pilot project, and what researchers such as Keogh (2001), Ho (2000), Sakar (2001), Mello (1998), and Jor and Mak (1994)

advise. The reason for this was because I also could not assess students on such a project as all the Foundation students<sup>164</sup>, including those in other classes, had to be given the same assessment tasks.

The intention of the e-pal project was to establish the extent to which participants could engage in global communities. In the pilot study I intended for participants to send me copies of their e-mails so that I could keep track of them. However, this proved to restrict their freedom, so I allowed the participants in the final project (OLEP) to communicate privately, and rely on their views of the project, as well as some of their e-mail messages. Therefore, in this final part of my study, I decided not to have all participants send me copies of all their messages, except for Alex and Herman, who agreed to do so. For ethical reasons, I have not included e-mails from the partner-students.

In terms of maintaining contact, all four participants said that not all the e-pals responded regularly, and that some of them did not have much to write. One way perhaps, of preventing such a discrepancy in the rate of responses would be for teachers to stipulate a minimum number of contact sessions, to prevent students from feeling excluded if their e-pals do not respond. Although this sounds quite forced and structured, it is necessary to ensure equitable participation, as explained in the pilot study. Such a decision, however, depends on facilitator co-operation, and maintenance of common goals.

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<sup>164</sup> There were about 180 Foundation in English students in total in Semester One, 2004, and the number dropped slightly in Semester Two to about 140.

When asked about the content of the communication, the common topics of discussion included life in South Africa and China, university life, participants' studies, and culture. Students found that they were studying a range of courses. My students were primarily Arts students, while the Chinese students were studying Engineering. This did not appear to deter my students, who thought it was interesting to communicate with students who have different interests.

The communication was not restricted to facilitator-selected topics, but students at both universities were asked to write as extensively as they could so that they could expand their vocabulary and perhaps expand their English writing skills. Herman and Alex e-mailed me some of their messages when I asked if I could read some of the correspondence. I follow the progress of some of Herman's correspondence to illustrate communicative practice. The following extracts illustrate:

*Figure 6.5.2: Herman's introductory posting*

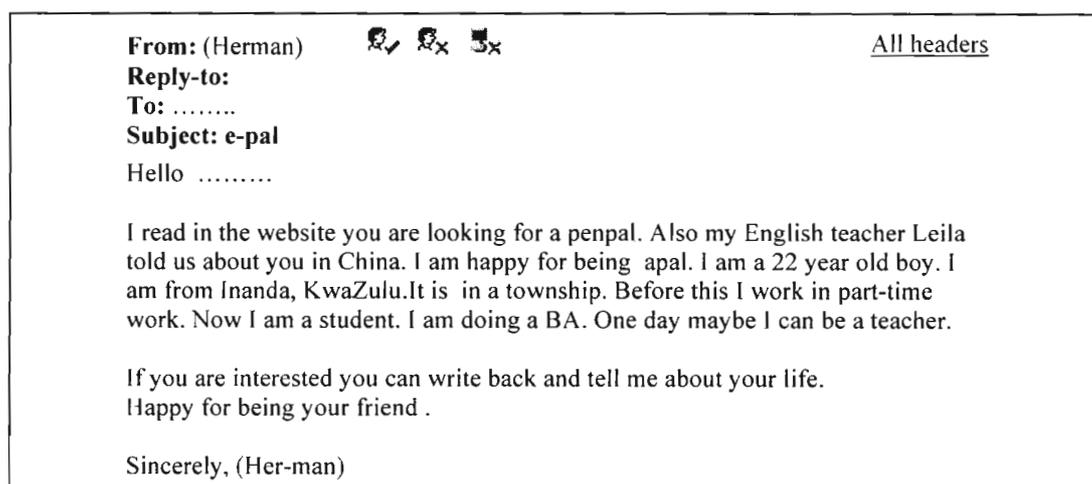


Figure 6.5.3: Herman receives a response

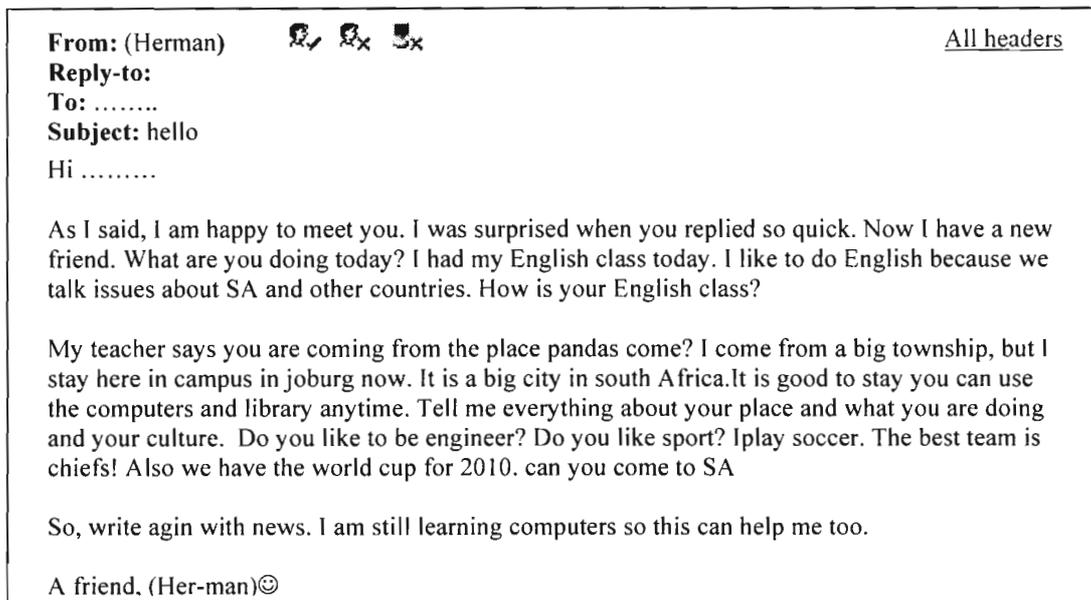
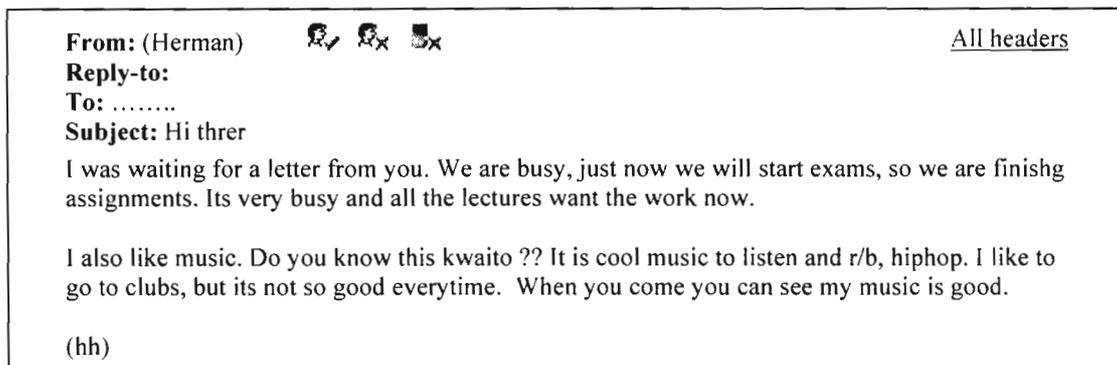


Figure 6.5.4: Herman sustains contact



Herman and this particular e-pal were obviously exchanging general information about their likes and dislikes. They later also exchanged cultural information about their family practices, such as naming practices, which is a topic we covered in class, and the languages they speak. Later, Herman said he explained the genre *kwaito* to his partner. Altogether, Herman says he wrote about ten times to his e-pal, and that their correspondence was of a similar nature to the above extracts. When I met Herman after the final examination in November he said that they were still in contact, but that it was not very often. Alex said that his experiences were similar.

As discussed in Chapter 2, e-pal projects have benefits for the teaching and learning of English. Reported advantages include an increase in student confidence, as well as linguistic and cultural knowledge (Ho, 2000), improved reading and writing skills (Sakar, 2001), producing a wide range of discourse structures (Lee, 2004), and writing for a 'real' audience (Jor and Mak, 1994).

Drawing on the literature, I asked participants about these reported benefits. Oscar and Adam said that they enjoyed the e-pal experience, and that they would do something like this again. Adam was not clear on how it would fit in to an English course, while Oscar thought it should be linked to other projects so that more students could gain from the experience. Both reported that they were more confident as a result of the exchanges. Adam said:

You can write, and someone is writing back. Like you are talking. Only you must be regular...to correspond. I can see this is a good thing. You can learn to communicate with all people...different cultures (15.9.2004).

Herman felt that he gained most from the cultural contact, in that he would not otherwise have had an opportunity to communicate personally with someone from such a different cultural group. He said that the system "(had) possibilities".

Alex added:

*Alex:* I had two penpals in China, they were one boy and one girl, doing some Engineering. They wanted to communicate so we are writing to each other. I learn about them, they learn about me...culture, varsity.

*Leila:* OK, wonderful, did you enjoy it?

*Alex:* For me, it was the first time I am writing to someone in China, my family say what is this? My friends say let me read. Only their [the e-pals, my insertion] English is not so good, I say I am better (20.9.2004).

Alex spoke about the project outside class as well, and also felt that he would like to try a similar project with other students who were studying in a similar field in other countries, or at other universities. All four participants felt that the e-pal

communication gave them an opportunity to improve their English because it was a 'real' situation. Adam and Oscar both felt that the interactions were like having a conversation with someone, only in writing. While the participants were not given pre- and post tests, they agreed that the e-pal exposure gave them an opportunity to use the language, and they felt that their reading and writing skills had improved, as had their confidence.

In relation to communities of practice, all the participants were able to establish relationships with partners: they discussed issues pertaining to their lives, negotiated meaning, and learnt about one another. While the one-on one relationships do not constitute communities of practice *per se*, I found them to be an integral part of relationship-building, which in turn contributes to community-building. Furthermore, the partnerships established transcended classroom relationships, and show that global communication was facilitated.

Students participated peripherally, until they began to feel more confident with their e-pals, and eventually participated more centrally, thus, creating a social network that extended beyond the class. It is interesting that the four participants were the only ones who sustained contact. Those who did give up did so after participating only peripherally. Once they experienced technical problems, they did not pursue the e-pal project. However, such difficulties are a downfall in authentic tasks, and often, the teacher has little control over the development of the tasks. This is especially true if the tasks are assessed and students do not have much control over when their partners write to them.

The non-participants attributed disinterest, laziness, and lack of time in the computer laboratory as reasons why they did not pursue the contact. Not all the participants participated in all three communities, and only the four maintained contact internationally. Did these participants exhibit particular qualities? In the next chapter on self-directed learning I attempt to address the question. In the following section I reflect on the extent to which participants were able to participate in communities of practice.

### **6.6 Reflections on communities of practice**

Thus far, it is evident that students were able to participate in diverse communities of practice in the online environment. The communities established moved beyond the confines of the conventional face-to-face class. Of the communities identified, the students participated in three types of communities: the communities within, that is, their public interactions and relationships within the Foundation in English online class, communities beyond, or the private communities established outside of the online class, and finally, global communities, where four participants communicated with international e-pals.

Participants established relationships and maintained social contact with the lecturer, with one another, and with international students, thus diminishing boundaries, and narrowing social distance. They participated peripherally, and with assistance from other students and the facilitator, they became more active participants. I further noted their use of language in the online class as displaying both the characteristics of spoken and written text.

Of particular interest in this study, is the extent to which participants constructed identities in the online environment. In the second part of this chapter, I examine the notion ‘construction of identities’ from the data elicited from selected discussion threads on polygamy, which is one of the course themes, their electronic literacy histories, and interviews, in response to the third research question “How do participants construct identities in online environments?”

## **6.7 Constructing virtual identities**

Identities may be constructed through personality, social roles, relationships, shared values, and language use. In a computer-mediated environment, the variety of options CMC offers participants in designing their identities is an attraction (Lam, 2000). In virtual computer-mediated environments therefore, these may be manifest through participants’ use of language, names and social cues such as emoticons. In his study of identity and language use in teenage blogs<sup>165</sup>, Huffaker (2004), for instance describes how American teenagers constructed their identities through their disclosure of personal information, their choice of online names and avatars<sup>166</sup>, and the use of emotive features. I elected to explore how participants constructed their identities on discussion threads using three categories: their use of names and nicknames, emoticons and social cues, and language use.

### *6.7.1 Names and social cues*

Turkle (1995) says that the use of names and nicknames in computer-mediated communication makes it a social arena in which people construct multiple roles and personae (refer also to Lam, 2000). As facilitator of the course, I referred to myself by

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<sup>165</sup> A weblog, or blog is a journal that is designed and maintained via the Internet.

<sup>166</sup> Avatars are graphical icons that help represent a real person in a virtual context (Huffaker, 2004).

my first name “Leila”, and would often sign off a message using only initials “III”, sometimes with a smiley ☺. I was addressed as Leila throughout the course, both face-to-face, as well as online. Initially, all the student participants identified themselves very formally, using their given names, and using formal business correspondence style by signing off their messages “Yours sincerely”. For instance, B signed off “Kindly regards” (Figure 6.3.1.1.9: Personal message 2), and E signed off “Your sincerely” (Figure 6.3.1.1.4: Research update 1). The following table illustrates some of the formats used:

*Figure 6.7.1: Participants' use of names*

<b>Participants' use of names</b>	<b>Facilitator's use of name</b>
Yours sincerely + name + surname	Leila
Your student + first name	Leila + smiley ☺
Kindly regards + first name	III
First name + surname	
First name + smiley	
First name only	
Nickname	
Initials only	
Emoticon	
No name	

After their initial posts, some of the participants adopted a less formal style by using their nicknames, evidence of their becoming more comfortable with the medium and members of the COP. Not all the participants used nicknames, but the names selected show a definite gender bias. Figure 6.7.2 that follows illustrates the nicknames used:

*Figure 6.7.2: Participants' use of nicknames<sup>167</sup>*

<b>Male nicknames</b>	<b>Female nicknames</b>
Dude	Number One Gal
Boss	Lucky Lady
Genius	Hottie
Clever	Beyonce
Great one	

Bays (1998, in Lam, 2000) says that nicknames are signs of individuality, and carriers of sociological cues, such as age, gender, and interest, which affirms Turkle's (1995)

<sup>167</sup> Nicknames revealing the identity of participants are not used here.

view of virtual environments as social arenas. Participants tended to use stereotypical male and female nicknames, some with provocative and sexual undertones, as was seen in Bechar-Israeli's (1995)<sup>168</sup> study of the names used in chat rooms. The practice was only adopted when one of the students used a nickname, and this had a spillover effect, with others following suit. Each tried to outdo the others in relation to name choice, however, it is not clear if these were the nicknames used normally by participants, or whether they were created for their online personae.

Male nicknames such as 'Dude', 'Boss' and 'Great One' indicate the tendency towards male dominance and superiority, while Clever is a nickname commonly used in the townships to indicate someone streetwise and witty. Female nicknames showed typical female stereotypes, as in 'Number One Gal' and 'Lucky Lady', and sexual undertones, as in 'Hottie'. 'Beyonce' indicates the popular female music star.

Social cues such as emoticons were not used extensively, primarily because participants had not used them before on computer. After I used a smiley, several students asked me about its use, but only a marginal number of participants used emoticons, the most common being ☺, ;-), and :) (happy face). In Figure 6.3.1.1.8, referred to earlier, E used asterisks and slashes (\*\*<<//Thank you>>//) which I interpret as his way of trying to demonstrate emotion or social presence, and the non-verbal in the absence of his knowledge of emoticons.

In relation to netspeak, although most of the participants had access to cell phones and were familiar with 'sms-talk', the use of abbreviations, contractions and acronyms were also not popular until later in the course, for example, "I studied ovanite"

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<sup>168</sup> Cited in Huffaker (2004).

(overnight), and “C U in kls” (See you in class). The use of punctuation to convey mood and emotion was a more popular choice, such as “So what does this mean?????” and “Hiiiiiii!!!!!!” One participant wrote her initial messages in capital letters, but said she did this because she was lazy to change case, not because she was trying to convey any meaning in particular.

Generally, participants did not make excessive use of names, nicknames, or emoticons to construct their identity. I suggest that this is primarily because of the novelty of the medium. When the features were used, it was to enhance the meaning of the messages. In the following section I examine how participants constructed their identities in relation to their social lives and experiences.

#### *6.7.2 Identity and social lives*

Rather more apparent than the use of names and emoticons, was the way in which identity was constructed in relation to the participants’ roles and their sense of worth in society (Norton, 1997, 2000). As referred to in Chapter 2, Turkle (1995) said “The Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life” (1995:180). Participants discussed how they felt positioned in relation to others in terms of access to technology, as well as how this positioned them in the South African context, and in relation to social issues discussed in class: polygamy, HIV/AIDs, gender, and language use.

Nothando said she felt that her ability to use technology made her a “somebody” and a “something” (16.9.2004), and Lucky said it gave him “status” (14.9.2004). Both participants associated the ability to use technology with privilege, esteem and power,

and an entity that distinguished them from those without access. Several participants said they considered themselves fortunate, as their friends at nearby universities were not exposed to technology in their courses at undergraduate level. They also felt that the use of technology gave them better material, economic and career prospects. This is consistent with West's (1992) view of identity as it relates to the desire for recognition and affiliation (in Norton, 1997). Their perception of ICT influencing their career prospects positively is also consistent with Fang and Warschauer's (2004) findings that the use of ICT provides input that is relevant to students' lives<sup>169</sup>. The desire for recognition and affiliation is inseparable from material resources in society, where those with access to such resources are accorded access to power and privilege, likewise, limited early access to ICT left students feeling marginalized. Thus identity shifts as social and economic relations change.

Mbali related the issue of access to technology to apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. She wrote in her electronic literacy history, and reiterated during her interview that the lack of access to material resources such as computers in post-apartheid South Africa was a perpetuation of apartheid times because it was generally white and Indian students who had ICT access at home and at the schools they went to. Thus, she positioned these particular race groups as privileged, a situation which she felt was still perpetuated from apartheid to post-apartheid South Africa, where black students still lacked privilege and power.

Students also identified with the themes in the courses because of their strong views on issues of gender inequality, HIV/AIDS and polygamy in their communities. Thus

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<sup>169</sup> Fang and Warschauer (2004) also found that the use of ICT enables interaction and autonomy.

they constructed themselves textually<sup>170</sup>. I perform a critical discourse analysis of the selected texts that follow. I refer again to a posting by O<sup>171</sup>:

Figure 6.7.2.1: Polygamy posting 1

**FROM:** O...  
**SUBJECT:** The lecture today  
[Reply | Archive | Delete | Forward]

How was our (name removed) lecture?  
I enjoyed it so much But I think it was just too fast and our lecturer hurried through out the whole thing.however it made some sence I think it was going to be much better,if we had time.

So you guys how far have you gone with your Oral presentation and what topics are you dealing with.We are dealing with Polygamy if you have some ideas on polygamy I think you should help us.If you have anything to debate about polygamy please write me.I am for polygamy bearing in mind among other things that polygamy is resistance to cuturel imperialism.At least those who practice it have cuturel values that they are still keeping.Although thesedays it is a total greedness of women.But I think also it is justified since males are fewer than females for example here at Wits university.Say we have a comminity like this University else where. What would those un lick ones do if they have no men to love them.You know women and men need someone to give loveor vise-versa. If you have any options air them to me. thank you O...

The message above clearly indicates O's view on identifying with, and maintaining cultural practices and values. He perceives polygamy as "resistance to cultural imperialism". His use of "at least" indicates that in his view, traditional cultural practices must be kept alive.

His comment on the "greedness of women" is somewhat dislocated from his argument, until he refers to the number of women exceeding the number of men, which in his view also justifies polygamy. He could also be referring to women as greedy in that they do not want to share their men<sup>172</sup>. O constructs a particular view of masculinity as hegemonic. He also perceives relationships as heterosexual, with men playing the dominant role. He asserts that women need men and refers to these women as "unlick" (unlucky) "if they have no men to love them". Somewhat ironic is

<sup>170</sup> Please refer also to Lam's (2000) and Ivanic's (1998) work on textual identity, as discussed earlier.

<sup>171</sup> I am grateful to Dr Carolyn McKinney for her valuable insight on the analysis of some of these postings, as well as input and comments from the Writing Group at WISER.

<sup>172</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous *Perspectives in Education* reviewer for this insight.

that O uses high-tech Western (imperialist) computer-mediated communication to debate traditional values. He received several responses to this posting.

In response to the above posting, A commented that he agreed with the idea of polygamy for cultural reasons, however, not for economic reasons:

*Figure 6.7.2.2: Polygamy posting 2*

**FROM:** A....  
**SUBJECT:** [[Reply](#) | [Archive](#) | [Delete](#) | [Forward](#)] re:The lecture today

My grandfather had three wives. It is good for the family and according to customary law it is right. But what if the economy is bad like now? How can he provide? I cannot afford many wives or girlfriends!

A constructs the traditional patriarchal view of the male as provider for the family. As a Law student it is also interesting that he makes a case to support customary law and polygamy. In referring to the poor economy, he also constructs a view of many young black South Africans who have aspirations of wealth and material possessions in a post-apartheid consumerist society. In so doing, like O, he also sees the role of the male as hegemonic provider in heterosexual relationships.

B expressed concern about polygamy for health and social reasons:

*Figure 6.7.2.3: Polygamy posting 3*

**FROM:** B....  
**SUBJECT:** re:The lecture today  
[[Reply](#) | [Archive](#) | [Delete](#) | [Forward](#)]  
Polygamy adds to HIV/AIDS – a man with many wives will spread the disease to the wives and children. In my township there are too many aids orphans. Who will look after them? We need one man-one wife!!!!

B's construction of gender roles engages with how women are positioned in heterosexual relationships. He positions them as powerless to negotiate sex with their partners, and the disease is "spread" to them, placing themselves and often, unborn

babies, at risk. In so doing he also simultaneously positions men in a dominant position of power in their insistence on unprotected sexual relations. His social concern for the care of AIDs orphans also foregrounds the harsh reality of the dissolution of the family structure, where many AIDs orphans are being looked after by community care-givers, elderly grannies, or left to fend for themselves, hence his emotive call for the nuclear family “We need one man-one wife!”.

O decided to respond to the thread again with the following:

*Figure 6.7.2.4: Polygamy posting 4*

**FROM:** O....  
**SUBJECT:** Polygamy  
[\[Reply\]](#) | [Archive](#) | [Delete](#) | [Forward](#)  
I think polygamy works in the sense of protecting our culture.If any generations does not pass on our culture this will mean, we will be left without any history of culture.There are some after effects of polygamy especially these days.But if one does it properly it works.Today women talks of equal rights but in past women was supposed to be undermen or you will risk to be disrespected.In my country polygamy was being practised so as to have a big family.The reason of having a big family was not work in the fields and those days any one's wealth was seen on the amount of food you have in your grainery.Some families would even exchange their daughters for food.So the politics was the more food you have the more wives you get.Just like today people still have this behaviour.Modern man gets more girl friends when they have money than those without money.Women never wanted to starve even in history.If you can not look for what to eat then it means you have no one prepared to offer you love.As long as you have money these days you can have as much women as you want,although you risk HIV and AIDS and more problems.Bob Nastor Marley Said " No women no cry" and Notorious BIG also said "more money more problems" in their songs. I think men are still practising polygamy though in a different way or I can say they have given it a nice name to try and make it more modern.

I do not think women are being disavantaged.The problem is they do not want to take it.Even the tenth wife will not want her husband to get the eleventh wife.I think if one can afford it let him do it.

o...

O reiterates and clarifies his position that polygamy is a cultural practice that makes sound economic sense, and should not be lost. His post, like A’s in Figure 6.7.2.2, positions him as valuing the traditional patriarchal family structure. He constructs men as providers and protectors of women, and of women as requiring the support and protection of men. His use of “history” and “culture” demonstrates his view that if cultural practices are not maintained, they are lost forever. Although he

acknowledges that there are “after effects” of polygamy, he does not clarify them. His view is that if polygamy is practiced “properly” (properly), it is a successful practice, however, he also does not go on to clarify what successful practice entails. He provides a contrast between today’s women who are gender-conscious, with those of the past, who would be considered disrespectful if they were not subservient, or did not abide by cultural practices (“in past women was supposed to be undermen or you will risk to be disrespected”).

His argument around the need for sustenance further justifies polygamy, where he equates food with material wealth. His view is that a large family is economically sound, because large families have more food, or are able to get more food. However, he does not clarify that larger families also require more food. He demonstrates the strength of his argument by saying that daughters may be exchanged for food, however, he does not provide his opinion of the practice. Interestingly, he says that the situation is still prominent today, the more money a man has, the more popular he is with females, constructing women as greedy, materialistic, and reliant on men, as he said in his earlier posting (Figure 6.7.2.1). He also makes reference to Bob Marley and Big who use similar themes in their music. His view is that polygamy is still practiced today, but it is couched in more polite terms. Essentially, he supports polygamy in this lengthy extract, although he does not justify all his arguments sufficiently.

M, a female participant, constructed her identity strongly in terms of her views on self-reliance, empowerment and gender equality, in stark contrast to previous participants:

Figure 6.7.2.5: Polygamy posting 5

**FROM:** M....

**SUBJECT:** Polygamy

[[Reply](#) | [Archive](#) | [Delete](#) | [Forward](#)]

I am studying to support myself when I work. I don't need a man to support me. My mother, aunts and my grandmother needed a mans support. I can do it myself. Isithembu (*Zulu word for polygamy – my insertion*) is not for the modern man and woman.

M's construction of gender roles positions women as strong and self-reliant, and as valuing education and career accomplishments. This is in keeping with what Hall (1990:2) says about educated women "(they) expect and demand more from life than did the previous generations of women". M's notions of success are redefined from the traditional roles played by women, what Hall (1990:89) calls "new modes of success" among modern women. M refers to her mother, aunts and grandmother as being reliant on men, and as being in positions lacking power. Her strong use of the referent "I" supports her position: "*I am studying to support myself...I don't need a man...I can do it myself...*" (my italics). Her use of the isiZulu word "*Isithembu*" for polygamy also appears to call attention to her view on disconnecting the old and traditional from the new. In the face-to-face class discussions, M was insistent that women be more self-supporting. During class discussions on HIV/AIDS, for example, she was adamant and quite emotive that women were "killing themselves" by not carrying condoms because of negative male perceptions of the habit (class discussion, 18 August 2004).

Finally, unlike other male students, E, a male student, equates polygamy with the abuse of women:

Figure 6.7.2.6: Polygamy posting 6

**FROM:** E

**SUBJECT:** Polygamy

[[Reply](#) | [Archive](#) | [Delete](#) | [Forward](#)]

Polygamy is the form of marriage where by a person get married to more than one partner. Indeed polygamy works as a result it is cultural practice. Women are emotionally, economically, politically ...abused. Further I argue with the first response from this ISSUE, that he /she must think twice of polygamy. Firstly the ways in which it is practised, it is abusive to anyone or not? (women accept the ways in which they are treated in a polygamous marriage or not?). Secondly he or she must compare and contrast between the way, our fore fathers (refer from articles/ cases) practiced polygamy, she will see that there is a difference. IN MY OPINION I THINK IT IS ABUSIVE TO WOMEN and as a new generation living in the developing community getting ideas from everywhere we must not practice it or be part of it (as wife). I further accept that it OUR culture (african or any...) but it is wrong. WE MUST BE AWAY OF IT. POLYGAMY IS WRONG.

E does not justify polygamy, although it is a cultural practice (“OUR culture”), on the basis that times have changed, and that as the “new generation living in the developing community” we are exposed to new global ideas. It is interesting that, as a male, he presents the woman’s perspective, that women are empowered with “choice”. He demonstrates the strength of his argument by using capitals “IN MY OPINION I THINK IT IS ABUSIVE TO WOMEN... WE MUST BE AWAY [AWARE] OF IT. POLYGAMY IS WRONG”. However, although he accords women with the power of choice, he does not discriminate against men who are polygamous, except for saying the practice is abusive to women, and not that they are being abused by men.

While students construct their identity in face-to-face classrooms, the analyses of their online postings indicate that they apply similar principles of identity-construction in the online medium. This discussion is sustained in the following section on personal reflections.

## **6.8 Reflections on the construction of identities**

Castells says “Identity is people’s source of meaning and experience” (2004:6). In my research, I set out to examine how participants constructed identities in online spaces. I found that participants used language and social cues in constructing their identities, and responded to class themes in ways that illustrated how they positioned themselves in society.

In the online medium, participants positioned themselves as changing in response to the material and technological changes in society, characteristic of Hall’s (1992) view of the post-modern subject. They feel a sense of dislocation, but position themselves as they do in the face-to-face class in terms of social issues such as polygamy, HIV/AIDS, and gender. This demonstrates that the online medium facilitates, supports, and promotes the construction of identities. Their constructions are also consistent with Norton’s (1995, 1996, 2000) views, that identity refers to how people understand their relationships in the world, and how those relationships are constructed over space and time.

The online environment facilitated learner participation, negotiation and re-negotiation of meaning within communities of practice. The communities established moved beyond the conventional face-to-face class, with participants constructing their identities at different levels. Participants established relationships, and maintained social contact with the facilitator and with one another, thus diminishing boundaries, and narrowing social distance. They participated peripherally, and with assistance and co-operation from other students and the facilitator, became more active participants.

In Chapter 7 I examine learner autonomy, or self-directed learning, which is a central concern in any learning context<sup>173</sup>, to address my fourth research question “To what extent do learners perceive themselves to be autonomous in online environments?”

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<sup>173</sup> As is indicated in policy documents such as the *Green Paper on Higher Education* (1996).

## CHAPTER 7

### Perceptions of learner autonomy in face-to-face and online spaces

#### 7.1 Introduction

In Chapter 6 I examined the extent to which participants formed relationships and constructed their identities as a means of establishing the extent to which they engaged in online communities. The data demonstrated that communities of practice undeniably exist in online spaces, in fact the data indicates that students participate in diverse online communities simultaneously. However, students who appeared to be more independent, motivated, and receptive to change tended to participate more extensively in the online communities.

This data analysis chapter explores issues of autonomy or self-direction in online environments, and in this manner, sets out to answer the question “To what extent do participants perceive themselves autonomous in online environments?” As is discussed in Chapter 3, autonomy is one of the key characteristics that emerges in discussions of adult learning and e-learning. The characteristic also features prominently in policy documents, where it is seen to contribute to open learning, learner-centredness, active decision-making and independent and critical thinking<sup>174</sup>.

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<sup>174</sup> The *Green Paper on Higher Education* (1996) calls for lifelong learning, a concept which entails that learners should continue their learning throughout their lives, and that learning should be relevant to learners’ needs and life experiences (Longworth and Davies, 1999). Flexibility is also crucial in order to cater for learners’ needs regarding what they want to learn, how they want to learn, when they want to learn, and the pace they want to learn at. Access barriers such as geographical constraints, race, gender, age and physical disability should also be removed. In addition, learners should receive adequate support within the learning environment, such as counselling, tutoring, interaction and access to facilities and resources.

The use of ICT in language learning is often justified because it is said to promote learner autonomy, or self-directed learning (SDL)<sup>175</sup> (Jones, 2001; Toyoda, 2001; Ying, 2002; Fang and Warschauer, 2004). Guglielmino and Guglielmino (2003) add that SDL is one of the two major components of e-learning, the other being technical readiness. Research also shows that autonomous learners are able to take charge of learning both individually and co-operatively (Holec, 1988; Little, 1991; Pemberton, 1996; Little and Dam, 1998). Therefore, it is important that learners are positive about change in the learning environment, in this case, the change brought about by the introduction of technology.

In order to analyse the data thematically, I adopt the characteristics of self-directed learners, as established by Guglielmino (1977,1997) and Knowles (1975) as an analytical framework. Some of these characteristics have also been adopted by other researchers in the field, whose studies show the positive effects of autonomy in computer-assisted learning environments<sup>176</sup>. According to Guglielmino (1977,1997) and Knowles (1975), self-directed learners display the following characteristics:

- ability to learn on their own as well as in groups,
- ability to derive enjoyment from, and curiosity about learning,
- ability to assume responsibility for learning,
- ability to develop their own ideas,
- ability to address challenges in learning,
- ability to formulate learning goals,
- ability to locate resources,
- ability to use multiple learning strategies,
- ability to retain what they have learnt,
- ability to relate new knowledge to what they already know,
- ability to think critically,
- ability to assess their own progress,
- persistence,
- ability to manage their time well.

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<sup>175</sup> The terms 'autonomy' and 'self directed learning' are used interchangeably by researchers in the field, and are used thus in this thesis.

<sup>176</sup> Such as Holec (1981); Little (1991); McGarry (1995); Shannon (2000); Seabrook (2000).

The fourteen characteristics listed above formed the basis for the questions on SDL in the student interviews, as discussed in Chapter 4. While other researchers have reported on selected characteristics<sup>177</sup>, in this study I have opted to examine all fourteen characteristics to provide a more comprehensive picture of SDL in online environments. Having participated in the online project, learners were asked their perceptions of the above characteristics in relation to learning in general, as well as in relation to the extent to which they perceived online practices could promote autonomy. To explore the issue of autonomy fully, each characteristic is discussed independently, and its contribution to autonomy in online environments is summarized at the end of the chapter. I also consider the impact of culture on autonomy. The data is elicited from interviews conducted with participants towards the end of the online intervention, and from observations and facilitator journals.

## **7.2 Learning alone or in groups**

According to literature on autonomy (for instance Knowles, 1975; Guglielmino, 1997; Holec, 1981; Little, 1991; McGarry, 1995; Shannon, 2000; Seabrook, 2000), learners who are autonomous are equally comfortable working alone or in groups. Figure 7.2 indicates participants' preferences for learning alone, in groups, or using a combination of both methods in conventional and online environments. In this case the term 'conventional' refers to learning in face-to-face environments:

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<sup>177</sup> For example, Ying (2000) studied learner choice, goals and self-assessment; Kurek (2002) examined critical thinking; and Spratt *et al* (2002) studied teacher-learner responsibility for learning.

Figure 7.2: Participant preferences for learning alone or in groups

	Participant	Conventional context			Online context		
		Own	Group	Both	Own	Group	Both
1	Herman	x			x		
2	Farzana		x		x		
3	Precious	x				x	
4	Natalie	x			x		
5	Lucky			x	x		
6	Mabela			x	x		
7	Leonard			x	x		
8	Sibonelo			x	x		
9	Xing	x			x		
10	Oscar			x	x		
11	Elsie		x			x	
12	Nothando		x			x	
13	Zinhle		x		x		
14	Adam	x			x		
15	Musa	x			x		
16	Lindiwe	x			x		
17	Ernest			x			x
18	Alex			x	x		
19	Blessing			x	x		
20	Mbali			x	x		
<b>Total</b>		<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>%</b>		<b>35</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5</b>

Of the twenty participants in the study, the majority (45%) preferred a combination of individual and group study in traditional classes. To illustrate, Sibonelo said:

I use both but prefer group work to hear opinions, to get to know everything, debate, communicate. It is inculcated in your mind. And group work is the best. I feel I am making a contribution. Especially for a Law degree (14.9.2004).

A large percentage (35%) of the participants felt that individual work was preferable to group work in the same learning environment. Natalie and Xing, both foreign students, preferred individual study. Natalie admitted that this was because she is shy, and had few good friends, and Xing, because he felt that when working in a group “(you) worry each other” (14.9.2004). Natalie also felt that her use of English was not suitably proficient to enable her to participate in group work effectively. Zinhle and

Adam also felt that independent work was preferable to group work, as their comments indicate:

*Zinhle:* On my own because for me it's easy than depending on other people. When I want to stop I can stop, take a break (15.9.2004).

*Adam:* I would say alone, but if there are like-minded people, you may tell yourself in the group there is lack of commitment and it won't work. Since they are not doing it why must I bother, you say. On your own you can use your own pace, your own style, it's better. We are having problems in our research group...they don't keep meetings, they are not working together. Lack of commitment. In such a group you can start developing negative attitude. When you do the work we have to do so you are doing it alone, should work better when you are in a group (15.9.2004).

At this stage of the second semester students were collaborating on group Language and Research projects, which involved them searching the Net and using the library for material, as well as conducting research into language-related issues<sup>178</sup>. Adam was disgruntled with the group he was working with at the time because he felt they were not an effective team. He had complained to me twice before about their lack of commitment, which could be instrumental in his feelings about group work in general.

Twenty percent of the participants felt that group work was preferable to individual work; for instance Elsie and Nothando felt that they needed to discuss what they learnt in groups in order to make sense of it.

In relation to working online, the majority (80%) of the participants felt that working alone was preferable in online environments. Adam, for instance said:

*Adam:* I think it is more beneficial alone. Why do you need a group at the computer when it takes one to type? (15.9.2004).

Musa added:

*Musa:* Yeh, I actually enjoy working on my own. If I need some information I look on the Internet. And if I find it I am successful. I can do it on my own (14.9.2004).

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<sup>178</sup> The Foundation in English: Language and Research module is described in detail in the first data analysis chapter, Chapter 5.

A few participants (15%) preferred to work in groups on the computer. This was mostly attributed to the Net being a new addition to their learning environment, therefore they felt they would need help and support from other students. However, they did not see the need for large groups, for instance Elsie and Nothando said they generally went to the computer laboratory together which was beneficial to them because they could help each other. Precious said she needed help from others:

*Precious:* No, actually, when working on your own on the Net... you will always need help from the others. It's OK to work on your own, but to seek help from the others (13.9.2004).

Mostly, participants did not realize that they could work as a group on online group projects; they saw groups as being more helpful for technical assistance. Many students actually learnt to use computers and the Internet from friends in this way, as was explained in Chapter 5, indicating their preference for technical assistance from more competent peers.

Only one participant, Ernest, said that he could work individually and in groups online:

*Ernest:* Mostly I can do both, alone and in a group. I like to discuss, but then I need to understand on my own too. Sometimes we go together with someone to the lab and share a computer. This can also work for us (17.9.2004).

The results of the interviews on SDL thus far indicate that the participants are generally able to adapt to working in groups or on their own in face-to-face classes, however, in an online environment, they articulated their preference for working alone, rather than in groups, unless it was a small group where they helped one another technically. This could refute the community of practice notion, however, because the Foundation course did not extend to students working in groups on online projects, it is complicated to comment on this aspect. The next section examines the impact of the Internet on participants' enjoyment of, and curiosity for learning.

### **7.3 Impact of the Internet on enjoyment and curiosity**

Guglielmino (1977, 1997) maintains that learners with a propensity for self-direction enjoy, and are curious about learning. All the participants in my study said that they enjoyed learning and were curious to learn more. With regard to the impact of the Internet on their enjoyment and curiosity about learning, only Farzana and Xing felt that the Net did not have a great impact on learning. Farzana felt that books were more beneficial because “Books are there, you don’t have to switch on. Books are easier” (26.8.2004). Xing saw the Net as being “just for fun, not for learning” (14.9.2004). He added that in his other Commerce courses he used only textbooks, not online practices. Xing also felt that he was only doing work that was relevant if it involved writing formal essays or tests. He did not show much interest in other methods or practices, and also did not participate very actively with other students in class, hence his view that the Net could not be used in learning. He was also one of the first students in the class who asked what textbooks he should purchase for the course, however, the course does not rely on textbooks, rather articles and readings that lecturers and tutors find relevant. This could be a result of how teaching and learning was managed in the Faculty of Commerce.

Seventeen participants felt that the Net added to their enjoyment of learning and increased their curiosity for learning because of its novelty. They saw it as an exciting, new medium that is immediate and has updated information. They also felt that the multimodal nature of the Net, with audio and video<sup>179</sup>, contributed to their enjoyment. When asked if the Net helped him enjoy learning, Oscar said:

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<sup>179</sup> Although the course did not include audio and video material, these were accessed by students on their own.

I think so, because learning is all about new things, it's trying to get knowledge from new things, things you don't know. This new technology is giving me something new in my life. It is something that was not there before (16.9.2004).

Oscar's view that "learning is all about new things" was characteristic of his attitude in general. He often asked questions about anything new we were doing in class, or even if he encountered a new word. Perhaps this was because he was slightly older than the other participants, and because he had spent time working. He had also studied a few years prior to this study at a university in his home country, but had to leave because of what he called his "political activities". He was therefore very motivated to succeed this time round.

Adam added that the Net provided a stress-free learning environment. Where participants found it to be stressful, was usually if they were not technologically proficient, which is one of the reasons, together with SDL, identified by Guglielmino and Guglielmino (2003), as one of the problems students encounter with e-learning. For Ernest, the Net "open(ed) the world": "For me, it can open the world so easy. Then you enjoy, and if you are curious always want to know more" (20.9.2004).

Ernest was always keen on new experiences, although he sometimes found them intimidating in comparison with his Department of Education and Training (DET)<sup>180</sup> school experiences. Participants tended to compare their school and university experiences, in particular because one of their first essays in the first semester was a comparison between school and university. The University of the Witwatersrand

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<sup>180</sup> During the apartheid era, education systems and schools were racially segregated, and black students attended schools in the DET system. Many of the participants started school in the DET education system, prior to desegregation, and even thereafter, many of the township and rural schools remained 'black'.

proved to be an intimidating experience, especially for students from rural areas. This is picked up again later in this chapter.

It is evident that the majority of participants (85%) perceived the Net to have a positive impact on their enjoyment of, and curiosity about learning, largely because of its novelty value.

#### **7.4 Taking responsibility for learning: Learner or teacher?**

Another important facet of learning is when learners develop the ability to accept responsibility for their learning (Pereira, 1996; Downes, 2000; Guglielmino, 1997; Knowles, 1975). However, in the views of researchers such as McGarry (1995) and Ying (2002), conventional schooling still teaches students in ways that promote dependence, which leaves them poorly equipped to function beyond school. Students who are encouraged to be responsible for their learning are therefore more likely to be autonomous. In this section participants were asked whom they thought held responsibility for their learning: themselves or teachers, and whether they could learn in the absence of a teacher. Then they were asked if the same applied in an online environment. The following figure, drawn from the interview responses, provides an overview of their thoughts on who is responsible for their learning:

Figure 7.4: Responsibility for learning

	Participants	Learn with teacher	Learn on own	Learn on own and with teacher
1	Herman		x	
2	Farzana		x	
3	Precious			x
4	Natalie	x		
5	Lucky			x
6	Mabela	x		
7	Leonard	x		
8	Sibonelo		x	
9	Xing		x	
10	Oscar			x
11	Elsie		x	
12	Nothando		x	
13	Zinhle		x	
14	Adam		x	
15	Musa			x
16	Lindiwe		x	
17	Ernest			x
18	Alex		x	
19	Blessing		x	
20	Mbali			x
<b>Total</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>%</b>		<b>15</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>30</b>

Most participants (55%) felt that their learning was their own responsibility. A small minority (15%) thought the teacher should be central in the learning process, while 30% felt that they learnt both with the teacher and on their own. This tells us that the majority of the participants are autonomous with regard to this particular characteristic. These findings are unlike those of Spratt *et al* (2002), which showed that students preferred teacher-dominant classrooms for their formal learning, however, Spratt's (2002) group felt that informal learning experiences were the responsibility of learners.

Natalie, Mabela, and Leonard felt that the teacher is useful in mediating the learning process. Mabela brought up his high school (former DET) experiences, where students were not given an opportunity to be independent. The following extract demonstrates his views:

- Leila:* If you are in class, do you think the teacher should be the guide, showing you what to do, responsible...for learning?
- Mabela:* I think yes, at a certain point, yes, because she has to see if you understand something, especially for starters you are a new student so this is important. You sort of...you come from high school. You know things from high school, but its different here (at Wits). In high school the teacher does everything. You can't even think. You try to tackle questions with the experience you had in high school and that experience is not competitive. Like compare and contrast, we never did it like that. Like essays, like research proposals. It's all new now. So yes, the teacher has to start you off at the beginning.
- Leila:* And with the Internet, do you need a teacher to guide you, or can you just do the learning on your own?
- Mabela:* I think that it's a case of I would do it on my own. We can have a teacher to help us at the beginning, but we can do it. I think by far I know quite a bit of things about the computer now, it's just to help...
- Leila:* Maybe a technician, not the teacher?
- Mabela:* Ja, that will help.
- Leila:* Are there technicians in the labs you use? Do they help?
- Mabela:* Ja, there are, but they help the females (laughs) not all of us. I'm serious. They help girls only (laughs).
- Leila:* Have you complained?
- Mabela:* We don't know the channels, we don't have the power (14.9.2004).

Mabela felt that high school experiences did not prepare him well for university; for example, he said at high school “you can’t even think”. This view, that participants’ high schools did not prepare them adequately for university, recurred among students coming from the DET system, which was characteristic of the apartheid era in South Africa, where schools attended by black students were under-resourced, and teachers were insufficiently trained. Mabela also felt that he could work on his own to learn on the Internet, with a teacher to offer assistance at the beginning, as the current situation with laboratory technicians was unsuitable. His comment on not having “power” is interesting because it reflects that he equates his inability to ask for help as disempowerment. Other participants also commented on their feelings of powerlessness regarding the use of ICT because of their under-resourced backgrounds. As discussed in the previous chapter, participants equated this lack of access to racial differences, and consequently felt marginalized and excluded.

In relation to being responsible for their learning, and learning on their own, Herman, Farzana, Sibó, Xing, Elsie, Nothando, Zinhle, Adam, Lindiwe, Alex and Blessing all felt that students should be responsible for their own learning. Participants such as Herman, and Sibó saw the teacher as playing a facilitative role. Herman, for example felt that the teacher should only provide focus, and that easy access and convenience of the Net helped students assume responsibility. This also concurs with the role that ICT can play in relation to self-access centres and self-access learning. Self-access centres are equipped with computers and software to enable students to learn in their own time and at their own pace. It follows that students who are more autonomous will function more successfully in self-access learning environments.

Sibó also felt that learners needed to be more active, and not just “swallow the information” as they did at school:

*Sibó:* Ja, but I think learners must take an active role because teachers must more – facilitate. At university teachers guide with questions. This is a different learning environment. At school you get the notes and swallow the information. Here it is your responsibility, initiative to do something (14.9.2004).

Sibó’s view of learning is that students must be active learners, and contribute more to the learning process, while teachers facilitate the process. His view of learners as passively “gett(ing) the notes and swallow(ing) the information” is also a carryover from the DET system. Alex, Nothando, and Elsie also thought that school was very different from university in relation to taking responsibility for learning. They felt that teachers should facilitate the learning process, and act as guides.

From participant interviews, it is evident that the school background that many of the students came from appears to have been teacher-dominant, and where learners merely implemented what the teachers taught. Participants felt that this did not

encourage them to take responsibility for their learning, to the extent that they felt they were not required to think at school. This view is also articulated later in this chapter in the section on critical thinking.

When interviewed, Precious, Lucky, Oscar, Musa, Ernest and Mbali felt, to a certain extent, both teachers and learners were responsible for learning. Precious felt that teacher assistance was necessary when working with the Internet, while Lucky, Oscar, Musa and Ernest thought that teachers should take responsibility, and provide assistance at the beginning, then leave students to take responsibility. Lucky referred to teacher-dominant classrooms as “spoonfeeding” which he said did not encourage students to learn. He felt that more teacher-assistance was required in the first semester for first year students, but just to guide students. This would help students become more independent in later semesters and years of study.

Oscar said:

- Oscar:* I think a teacher is necessary to drive you, but the most important is yourself, ‘cos a teacher might be there, but if you don’t have the eager to learn you won’t learn. Ja, you can learn without a teacher.
- Leila:* Ok, when you learn on the Internet is a teacher necessary?
- Oscar:* How to use a computer?
- Leila:* How to learn in the course...
- Oscar:* I think a teacher is necessary to be... dis...disseminate the information about Internet, but physically, no. You can learn on your own (16.9.2004).

Oscar’s view, once again, is that if learners did not display enthusiasm they would not learn. On the whole, the majority of the participants in the study were convinced that students should take responsibility for learning, while the teacher’s role should be more facilitative. This is unlike Chan’s (2001) research with students at Hong Kong Polytechnic, where he found that although students wanted to have more responsibility for their learning, my students also felt that the teacher should play a more dominant role. Much of the discussion on teacher-learner responsibility in my

research stemmed from the differences the participants noticed between learning at school and at university. They appeared to have been given very little responsibility at school. Many of the participants felt that teachers should be able to help students in the initial stages, thereafter learners should be able to take over. This seemed to be especially true in relation to using the Net.

### **7.5 Developing own ideas in learning**

The ability to develop one's own ideas is a further characteristic of self-directed learners (Guglielmino, 1977, 1997; Knowles, 1975). Participants in my study were asked whether they were able to develop their own ideas, and if the Net facilitated the development of ideas. All the participants felt that they were able to develop their own ideas, and all, except for Natalie, felt that the Net enhanced their ability to develop ideas. Natalie felt that this was difficult for her to do.

The remaining nineteen participants believed that the Net could help them develop ideas for miscellaneous reasons: it offers different insights and perspectives (Herman), it provides limitless information (Farzana, Mabela, Sibó, Ernest), it teaches new skills (Precious), it provides global exposure (Lucky, Sibó, Blessing), it helps bridge the gap between university and work (Leonard, Oscar, Blessing), it offers current ideas (Xing) and it provides technological facilities such as audio and video, which stimulate the development of new ideas (Lindiwe). However, certain participants also felt it is important not to copy the ideas, but to adapt them for their particular needs (Nothando, Ernest). This insight shows that participants were beginning to see the need to be selective, and to exercise choice in their learning.

In relation to the Net offering new insights and perspectives, Herman said:

In general, because of the vast knowledge or research on the Net you'll see very different views, also you'll see things from different perspectives. One particular topic can be analysed by different people from different points of view (22.8.2004).

The comment on seeing different perspectives reveals Herman's view that in order to develop ideas, the ideas of others' are important. Participants were also starting to see the value of multiple perspectives, having, by this stage in the project, started to write comparative and argumentative essays in class, where we were also focusing on synthesising ideas from different sources.

With regard to global exposure, Lucky and Blessing commented on the world growing smaller because of the ability of technological networks to connect everyone.

This brought up points on globalisation. Lucky felt:

The Internet is many things, its not only South Africa I find. I discover many things across the country, across the world actually. Global things. I think it helps me find many things (14.9.2004).

Lucky, a drama student, was particularly interested in script writing, and had already written plays to be performed at local schools. He said he often accessed information on playwrights and theatres, both local and international, to get ideas for his work.

Blessing added:

We are a village, you know...everyone is connected. You can work on a project around the world and you haven't met the people...um... face to face even. Global connection...(27.9.2004).

For Xing, Nothando and Ernest, the Net provided a valuable opportunity to develop ideas that could be taken to the workplace, because of the exposure it offered. However, Nothando and Ernest also felt that these ideas should be made individual and adapted to particular situations, once again bringing up the issue of choice and selectivity discussed earlier in this chapter. Nothando said "You don't steal the idea, you make it your own" (16.9.2004).

It is evident that all the students felt they were able to develop ideas, and that the majority felt that the Net helps to sustain the development of ideas because it opened up new perspectives in their studies and future careers, and because it provided valuable global exposure. This is vital in addressing challenges in a newly-democratic country such as South Africa, and in locating South Africa's place in the world, as Ernest said:

*Ernest:* Ja, in South Africa everything is a challenge – where you stay, you study, you travel, you pass, education, money. It's still tough for a new democracy.

*Leila:* Is the Net a challenge?

*Ernest:* It's a new challenge – we will overcome it. It will make us equal in the world. You...you see if others are using it in the world and we are not, what is the use? We are going backwards (20.9.2004).

Ernest saw the use of ICT and the Net in South Africa as proving an opportunity for social inclusion, and for providing valuable equalizing opportunities to all South Africans. His view is that South Africa should not be retrogressive if the rest of the world is using ICT. He refers to the tenacity of South African people, having lived through the challenges of an apartheid system, yet still maintaining a positive attitude about change in the country. These challenges are taken up further in the next section.

## **7.6 Viewing challenges in learning**

According to Guglielmino (1977, 1997) and Knowles (1975), another characteristic of autonomous learners is their ability to manage challenges in learning. Participants were asked how they perceived challenges in learning, and whether they felt that the Net helped address these challenges. Of all the participants, only Natalie revealed that she did not like challenges in learning. Her reason for this, as in previous responses, is that she considered her English proficiency limited, and she saw that as enough of a challenge to her learning.

The remaining nineteen participants believed that challenges were beneficial for learning. They felt that the Net added to the challenge because of their limited proficiency, however, they added that it was a tool that could help address challenges in learning. When asked how the Net could solve challenges in learning, a variety of responses ensued. These included the following themes: learning as problem-solving, conceptual learning, creativity, social challenges in South Africa, narrowing the digital divide, and fulfilling aspirations. Herman saw the Net as assisting in problem solving, and as a research tool. Farzana commented that if one does not know concepts, the Net provides an answer in that a student can seek help from the medium. Precious felt that the Net makes one aware of creativity, which students can try to emulate. She said that such creativity might be limited in the text-based classroom.

Sibo, like Ernest in the previous section, displayed a broader perspective in his interpretation of challenges. He saw challenges as being social in nature. In his view, the Net was another challenge:

Life is always a challenge. Nothing is so easy. To get here is a challenge. Now is the Internet. We have to step over the hard things to get where we want to go. You always say Madiba did it. Who are we to sit back? (14.9.2004).

Sibo was from a particularly disadvantaged background, and he felt that he had to make great sacrifices to get to university, and the challenges along the way were just there to be overcome or “step(ped) over”. Many students who come to the University of the Witwatersrand from disadvantaged backgrounds cite such life challenges when they get to university. They often enter the university with limited finances, and sometimes without accommodation, and hope to solve these when they get to the university. Sibos reference to “Madiba” is former President Nelson Mandela who spent twenty-seven years as a political prisoner, for fighting the apartheid regime. He was released from prison in 1994 and was instrumental in leading South Africa to

freedom and democracy. In class we often discussed Madiba's struggle and tenacity as a metaphor for hard work and achieving our goals. In fact, one of the first pieces we read in class in preparation for students' autobiographical writing was an extract from former President Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. Ernest and Mbali were of a similar view, when they equated challenges with the social, economic, and political struggles experienced in South Africa:

- Leila:* ...do you like challenges?  
*Ernest:* Ja, in South Africa everything is a challenge – where you stay, you study, you travel, you pass, education, money. It's still tough for a new democracy.  
*Leila:* Is the Net a challenge?  
*Ernest:* It's a new challenge – we will overcome it. It will make us equal in the world. You...you see if others are using it in the world and we are not, what is the use? We are going backwards (20.9.2004).  
*Mbali:* Ja, there must be a challenge, something to aim for...strive for...it can help us to succeed. We had a struggle in South Africa, now it is even easy, so a challenge is right.  
*Leila:* Is the Net a challenge?  
*Mbali:* Ja, in the beginning, as you learn you can overcome it. It's not very hard to do. Just some people are afraid to start (1.10.2004).

Ernest's comments "it will make us equal in the world" bring to mind the debate over the digital divide, in the sense that he considers the use of technology as bridging the gap between South Africa and other parts of the world, as an equalizing force. He also saw the challenge as one for South Africa in terms of making progress. Mbali, too used South Africa as a metaphor for challenge, when she commented on the progress made in the country. She viewed the Net as just another challenge to be overcome. These participants' comments are reminiscent of Warschauer's (2002a; 2002b; 2003; 2004b; 2005, in press), Chapman's (1996) and Feenberg's (1991) discussions of the digital divide and technological determinism. The theorists propose that technology should not merely be introduced to under-resourced environments in the expectation that change is inevitable, but that it should be used for social transformation. Both participants saw the Net as providing a challenge, but also as a force that would help South Africa join the global world.

Yet others, such as Elsie, Nothando, Zinhle, and Lindiwe felt that challenges stimulate people to learn and to fulfil their aspirations, by helping them overcome their fears, and providing them with independence. Oscar felt that challenges helped students explore situations for themselves:

- Leila:* Do you like challenges in learning?  
*Oscar:* I like challenges.  
*Leila:* Does the Internet help you with challenges?  
*Oscar:* Ja, 'cos it's like...the class we did here. No body taught me, I explored on myself and now I am finding it so useful for my work. I can say everyone should do it. We must try and overcome and apply ourself (16.9.2004).

Thus, most of the students who participated in the study perceived challenges to be positive in the learning environment. They reflected that while the Net might be a technological challenge, it is also an aid in addressing challenges in the learning environment and in South Africa's role in the global arena. Participants felt strongly that South Africa needed to join the global community, and that the digital divide, which marginalized and excluded the country and its young people, must be bridged. This is also consistent with Chapman's (1996) and Warschauer's (2002, 2003) views on social inclusion, as well as the views of Lelliott *et al* (2000), who build a strong case for technology in Africa as a route to democracy.

### **7.7 The role of the Internet in formulating learning goals**

Nineteen of the participants considered themselves able to formulate learning goals. Only Herman said he experienced difficulty formulating such goals. Some of the participants felt that it was necessary to establish goals in order to achieve more in life (Precious), to improve oneself (Natalie), for one's future career (Lucky), and for direction (Mwali). Leonard and Xing said that they started to become more goal focused after failing in assessment tasks in the first semester (Leonard) and the previous year (Xing):

*Xing:* You must have goals, last year I did not have so much...direction...focus. This year I am more determined...English can help me if I am better. That's why I came from Shanghai. ...With the Internet you can speed your goals...how you say...get to where you want to be (14.9.2004).

Although Xing shows determination and says he has firm goals, what he says here about the Net accelerating his goals is inconsistent with a previous extract where he said he only saw the Net as being used for fun, not necessarily for learning<sup>181</sup>. Here he associates English with power, and sees the Net as facilitating that goal. Refer also to Lam's (2000) study of Almon, a Chinese immigrant student's transnational correspondence on the Net, and how he constructs his identity as he acquires English. Other students, such as Oscar, Zinhle, Ernest and Alex aligned their goals with the course outcomes that appear in the course outlines. They looked at the particular outcomes set out in the course outlines and used these as an indication of what they needed to attain in a particular course.

On the whole, the majority of the participants said they set goals for what they wanted to achieve. When asked if they thought the Net helped them establish goals, Sibó, Ernest, and Adam thought that the Net could play a role in goal setting and achieving. Sibó felt that the Net encouraged one to do extra work, which helps attain goals, while Adam addressed the question by providing an example. He felt that if his goal was to improve a specific skill such as speaking, extra reading on the Net was valuable in achieving that goal. Ernest's view was that students needed direction: "There must be a plan, you must have direction as a student, and the Internet can help you ...give you more direction.....add knowledge" (20.9.2004) .

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<sup>181</sup> Xing was particularly determined after failing the previous year, and although AELS does not admit returning students to Foundation courses as a rule, the Head of the Commerce department made a special request that Xing join an English class as he felt that it was Xing's limited proficiency in English that was a reason for his failure in Commerce courses (Conversation, February, 2004).

To a certain extent, according to four of the participants, the Net can help in goal setting and achievement by providing direction, adding to the knowledge base, and by increasing the pace at which goals may be attained. Xing's view that the reason for this is that it facilitates independent work, is also an important observation, although it is contradictory to what he said earlier in the interview. He felt that the Net's ability to promote independent work assisted in establishing and achieving goals. This is consistent with Ying's (2002) findings of learner-autonomy in a Web-based project<sup>182</sup>. She too found that the use of the Net aided students in setting goals in their project.

### **7.8 Participants' ability to locate resources**

All the participants believed they were able to find learning resources quite easily. In particular, using the library was mentioned. In relation to using the Net to find resources, seventeen of the participants believed it was relatively simple to do if they knew what they were looking for, and if they knew how to refine searches when they were surfing. All participants used search engines such as Google, but did not have any knowledge of electronic databases such as Ebsco for research, as discussed in the literature review of this thesis. Oscar thought that using the correct key words was important. However, the extensiveness of what is available on the Net was considered problematic, as is articulated by Alex and Blessing:

*Alex:* Ja, I know what to do, I surf. Only you must know what is necessary. Sometimes you get too much, then you must cut it (17.9.2004).

*Blessing:* Ja, I can do this, mostly I was too wide...too much information...now I can narrow the search down (27.9.2004).

Alex's and Blessing's views also echo Derewianka's (1993), referred to Chapter 2, on the breadth, rather than the depth of the Net, which she considered a challenge. Xing, who always used an electronic dictionary in class to translate from English to

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<sup>182</sup> Ying's (2002) study was discussed in Chapter 3.

Mandarin, and *vice versa*, added that one needed to be proficient in English to enable the location of resources:

It's easy to do Internet searches. We don't need to search for Commerce, but for our research project we can search. But if your English is not good you can get lost. I use the dictionary (14.9.2004).

Zinhle added that it was possible for students to get distracted on the Net when they should be looking for specific information, which hampered the process of locating resources.

In essence, all the participants felt they were able to locate resources quite easily, and the majority felt it was easy to locate resources on the Net if they were able to identify suitable key words, and were able to refine their searches. English proficiency is also preferable for locating resources, as argued by Xing.

### **7.9 Participants' use of learning strategies and retention**

The ability to adopt multiple learning strategies in the learning environment, and to retain what was learnt, is a further indication of learner autonomy. In my study, participants communicated that they used a wide variety of strategies that were also used in the online environment. The table overleaf, elicited from interview responses, illustrates participants' use of diverse learning strategies:

Figure 7.9: Participants' use of learning strategies<sup>183</sup>

	Highlight	Summaries	Main points	Discussion groups	Make notes	Mindmaps	Brainstorm	Additional notes from the Internet	Memorisation and recall
Herman	x	x	x	x					
Farzana			x		x				
Precious				x	x				
Natalie	x					x			
Lucky						x	x	x	
Mabela				x		x			
Leonard	x			x					
Sibonelo	x			x		x			
Bob	x	x							x
Oscar	x					x			
Elsie	x			x	x				
Nothando		x				x			
Zinhle	x	x							
Adam	x	x	x		x		x		
Musa	x								
Lindiwe		x	x	x	x				
Ernest		x							
Alex	x	x							x
Blessing		x					x		
Mbali	x	x		x					

Although participants felt that they did transfer some of the face-to-face learning strategies to the online environment, for instance, they felt they could engage in online discussion and download extra notes, they did not think it was possible to use techniques such as highlighting and summarizing main points online. These could be done only if notes were printed off the Net. They also could not make mindmaps electronically. Thus their use of strategies on the Net was dependent on the strategies they used in the face-to-face context, as they did not have sufficient computer literacy to utilise software that enabled the drawing of mindmaps, for instance, nor was such software loaded onto laboratory computers. They also tended to brainstorm ideas in face-to-face situations, but had not developed the ability to utilise the technique in the online environment, largely because this was not a component of the project.

<sup>183</sup> These are strategies used by learners' in general, and are not limited to the online environment.

In relation to retention, of all twenty participants, only three, Xing, Natalie and Lindiwe articulated some difficulty with retention. Xing said:

This is not always so easy for me....I read the English, sometimes I have to use the dictionary, so I don't think of it in English. Even if I remember, then I can't find the English word. That is why the essays ....they are quite hard to do (14.9.2004).

As a mother-tongue speaker of Mandarin, Xing said he tended to think in Mandarin, and translate into English, which he felt made it difficult to retain information. Natalie, who is Portuguese-speaking, also had similar difficulties. Unlike Xing, however, she would consult with me after doing a draft of each essay to check if she was doing the right thing. She also translated from Portuguese to English. In Lindiwe's case, she said she had always had difficulty trying to recall what she had learnt, since her school days.

Of the remaining seventeen participants, the ability to retain what was learnt depended on their use of learning strategies (Farzana, Precious, Leonard, Musa, Mbali), ability to focus (Sibo), the ability to relate information to other experiences (Oscar), and on novelty and interest in the Net (Adam, Ernest, Precious). Others such as Herman and Alex felt that if they were able to print out hard copies, they were better able to retain what they learnt.

Farzana felt that if she visualized what she was learning, for example, by using diagrams, she was able to retain and recall information, something that was facilitated by the multimodal<sup>184</sup> nature of the online environment. Precious and Adam felt that the novelty of the medium promoted retention:

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<sup>184</sup> Farzana did not use the term 'multimodal'. She referred to the Net as utilising images, which made it easy for her retain and recall information.

*Precious:* Yes, I do retain...keep what I learn. I use strategies...not like relying on memory. The Internet adds to remembering because it is a new medium (13.9.2004).  
*Adam:* Yes, I am able to remember. Sometimes it depends on what it is, if it is relevant to my work then I remember. Or if it is just for fun, then I know it's not serious. If I read an article on the Internet, if it is unusual...something so new... then I can remember. Or if it is about my work (15.9.2004).

Sibo felt that focus, attention, and critical thinking were more important in an online environment:

To retain you must focus...pay attention. You are not reading, memorizing. You are examining your work, you try to think about it critically, what does it bring to mind, how is it similar to what you already know (14.9.2004).

On the whole, the Net appeared to promote retention, although this was dependent on the participants' interest in the subject matter, as well as the novelty of the Net as a new communicative medium. Salaberry (in Bordonaro, 2003), however, cautions against the novelty value of the online medium because he found that the interest maintained by the novelty of the medium could be misconstrued as learning. I think that this observation is to be expected, especially with students who are new to the online medium.

#### **7.10 Relating what is known to the unknown in learning**

All the participants suggested that they were able to relate the known to the unknown when they learnt, and that this was facilitated by the use of online practices. Here, certain themes emerged: transference to other courses, and career, family, cultural and community issues.

In relation to transferring skills to other courses, Farzana felt that what she did in English, for example, writing essays, she was able to transfer to Psychology, and *vice versa*. She said that this helped her in terms of her skills development. Mbali agreed

with this point of view: “Yes...this is learning. It is not an isolation every time. Even we can relate to other courses” (1.10.2004).

These participants felt that if they related what skills they were learning to their other courses, it helped their learning. Mbali’s comment “It is not an isolation every time” shows her recognition that learning cannot occur in isolation, and that she sees it as a holistic process.

Lucky felt that it helped if he visualized what he was learning in relation to issues in his community and eventual career. Lucky, a dramatic arts student who was involved in script writing said:

*Lucky:* Ja, for sure, more specially. Whatever I am doing, more specially I relate it to my people, my community, to my students, to everything that’s around.  
*Leila:* Is this what you will write about in your scripts?  
*Lucky:* Ja, I hope, I see it happening. It’s a start. If my scripts are like reality, what I know...I am a success in the future (14.9.2004).

He felt that relating issues brought an authenticity to his scripts if they involved community issues. Sibó commented:

*Leila:* Sibó, do you relate what you are learning to what you already know?  
*Sibó:* I do, I do...if we are talking about gender, HIV, I can think also about the arguments in some cases. The Constitution, human rights issues. It opens everything...you see everything. If necessary, you must draw a table of what you know when you learn something new, it’s a good strategy (14.9.2004).

In terms of relating what was being learnt to family, cultural and community issues, many participants reflected on polygamy, HIV/AIDS and language issues. The thematic content of the Foundation course, supplemented by readings on the Net stimulated participants, who had this to say:

*Oscar:* Say our ancestors did something, like domineer women, this is wrong. We can also educate. But some things are cultural, but we must not lose it.  
*Leila:* Like dominating women?  
*Oscar:* No, like that I can say is wrong now, maybe it can get abusive. But for the polygamy *Isithembu* article. They are right ...it is African culture....if you can support. It’s not something to turn away so easy (16.9.2004).

As in the case of the discussion threads examined in Chapter 6, Oscar brought up the issue of polygamy once again. He felt that we must not accept anything without question in the name of culture and tradition. While it is important not to lose cultural beliefs, Oscar believed that we should also learn from cultural mistakes that are being made in today's society. He felt that today, cultural practices such as patriarchy were misinterpreted as abuse against women.

Musa brought up an interesting issue from an urban legend: if an HIV positive individual has sexual relations with a child, s/he will be cured of the disease. This belief is supposedly one of the reasons for the spate of child abuse cases across the country, which all participants strongly disapproved of:

- Musa:* Yes, I tend to relate it to something that happened in my community or surroundings, so when you learning, in order for you not to forget you relate it so you can remember it easily. Like child abuse for HIV cures....
- Leila:* Have you had experience of this?
- Musa:* Not in my family, but you hear about it in the community. You know it is happening and you must stop it (14.9.2004).

The participants were able to draw on family, community, and life experiences in terms of relating what we were doing in class to what was happening in their lives. This ability to relate the known to the unknown demonstrates further their tendency for autonomy.

### **7.11 Participants and critical thinking**

Participants viewed critical thinking as the ability to challenge, question and debate the themes covered in class. Sixteen of the participants claimed that they were critical thinkers, while four (Farzana, Precious, Natalie and Xing) felt that they were not. Precious and Leonard commented that their DET school experiences were responsible for students not being able to think critically:

*Precious:* Well, I don't question everything. This is not how I was taught in school. I was just given everything, didn't question. Maybe I should question more. Wits is the place for thinking (13.9.2004).

Although Leonard said he was a critical thinker, he added that DET school teachers, in his experience, felt threatened when students asked questions in class:

*Leonard:* Once again, to succeed at varsity, we are told to be critical thinkers, but how do we do this? We ask questions, argue, mostly in English. But we also have to get used to this. Our teachers...they think we are challenging them in the school situation...maybe not respecting...now it's OK to ask...we must ask (14.9.2004).

Such feelings where teachers felt threatened by students who asked questions in the classroom could be the result of teacher-insecurity, lack of confidence, or because of poor teacher training. According to certain participants, when students asked questions, the teachers felt they were being challenged, and that their authority was not being respected. The transition from school to university obviously makes contradictory demands on students, especially those from under-resourced school backgrounds, who feel under-prepared to cope with the dominant academic discourses<sup>185</sup>.

When asked if online practices could facilitate critical thinking, Bob, Adam, Blessing and Mbali were ambivalent. The feeling here was that people had to have open minds regarding what was available in the online environment before they made up their minds. This is also consistent with Toyoda's (2001) and Kurek's (2002) findings of learner autonomy in online environments. Mabela commented that the medium did not influence the ability to think critically, as the individual remained the same. He said "It's the same person, only the information is more". His point was that critical thinking was dependant on the individual, not on the medium or the content. Adam felt differently. He referred to the Net as "dominating people into believing anything".

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<sup>185</sup> Spurrett (2005) also discusses this issue in his study of a critical thinking component in a Philosophy course at University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Once again, the issue of choice came up. Blessing and Mbali also believed that one had to be selective about online material, and that it had to be utilised carefully according to one's needs. Choice essentially depends on the ability to discriminate, and those who were able to make this distinction in my study were also more autonomous (refer also to Kurek, 2002).

Of the participants who thought the Net facilitated critical thinking, Lucky and Oscar elucidated:

- Lucky:* Yes, I will also emphasise that point. I won't go away from this point. Listen, as we discover many things, that will make us to be critical, we think more about it, like o-k-a-y (drawn out, my insertion), this is how this comes. I have to think about it, I have to develop my own understanding (14.9.2004).
- Leila:* Can the Net and online environment help you be a critical thinker?
- Oscar:* For sure it can...like if you read a certain view...you must decide. There is also ..propaganda...politics. They make you believe it. So you can see the views...you don't have to accept, but it is a powerful medium. Think for child abuse on Internet (16.9.2004).

Both Lucky and Oscar were also of the view that an open mind was essential, and that what appeared on the Net should not be taken prescriptively. Oscar is not clear about who "they" are in his reference to "They make you believe it". However, it could be interpreted as those in positions of power who could try to influence users' decisions, views and beliefs, for instance, in the area of politics. His reference to child abuse on the Net indicates the growing number of incidents involving children being lured into pornography rings or cults through the Net<sup>186</sup>.

Consequently, participants were of diverse views about critical thinking. Some felt they were able to think critically, and saw it as essential to learning, while others felt that this characteristic was discouraged at school, and therefore they were unable to think critically at university. With regard to the role played by online environments in

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<sup>186</sup> One such case is of a Johannesburg teenager, Diane MacMillan, who came into contact with the American Living Love Fellowship through the Net. She ran away from home to join the cult and later married its leader (*Saturday Star*, 7 May 2005).

promoting critical thinking, some participants felt that the environment had the ability to promote critical thinking because of the different views it offered, while others felt that because of the extensiveness of information offered, they had to be selective. The ability to make discriminate choices and think critically is also characteristic of the move from legitimate peripheral participation to central participation in COPs (Lave and Wenger, 1991, 1996, 2002). Thus, as participants engaged more discriminately with the medium, they moved from peripheral to central participation in the online community.

### **7.12 Participants' ability to assess their progress**

The Foundation in English course includes different forms of assessment practices, such as lecturer, peer and self-assessment. This encourages learners to assess their own progress in the course. In this section, participants once again had divergent views on assessing their progress, but what is to be noted is that the online project did not consist of assessment tasks, for reasons given earlier in this thesis. Fourteen participants said they were able to assess their own progress, under general conditions, while six said they could not (Natalie, Lucky, Xing, Nothando, Lindiwe, Musa). On the whole the latter group felt that they were not accurate enough to be able to assess their own work, as is evident in Nothando's comments:

*Leila:* OK, are you able to assess your own progress? Do you look back and say this is the mark I should get, or how I have done?

*Nothando:* Every time I try that maybe I judge myself the wrong way, so I am not always accurate. But there is this girl from high school. She got As for her matric and when we got here she is getting lower marks than I am and she asks me what is the problem. At varsity you won't be clever. It doesn't mean if you pass high school with As you will do that here. I used to learn a thing and remember, but here it's different...you have to focus on different things, the teachers don't know you. You have to prove yourself with your work (16.9.2004).

Nothando illustrates her point on the difficulty in assessment by pointing out the inconsistency of someone who did very well in high school, but could not cope at

university. Although the point she makes is not about self-assessment *per se*, it illustrates the inaccuracies and discrepancies from a school system to university. Her point that “the teachers don’t know you” is interesting in its implication that if teachers know students, they perform better at tasks. She implies here that students at university are just faces in a crowd, or that they are indistinguishable, which is why their work should be of a good standard.

The ability to assess English in particular proved problematic for many participants. Lucky, Adam, Xing, Natalie and Musa felt that they might be able to assess their progress in terms comparing their standard of work at the beginning of the year, with their work at the end of the year. However, they felt that assessing their English was difficult, and often their marks were inconsistent with those assigned by the lecturer. This could be because they felt insecure of their English proficiency as second and additional language speakers of English, and needed guidance.

Even those participants who felt they could generally assess work fairly accurately, found self-assessment quite difficult. Precious, Sibbo and Zinhle therefore felt that the lecturer’s input was necessary. For instance, Precious said:

*Leila:* Are you able to assess your own progress, Precious?  
*Precious:* You mean like marking my work? Yes I do this in class, but I also like the lecturer’s marks and comments. It is more accurate (13.9.2004).

Adam found it especially difficult to assess group work, which was being done at the time of the interviews, and Mbali felt that because her assessment was not as accurate as the lecturer’s, good criteria were necessary. All Foundation assessment tasks included intensive assessment criteria. I found that the criteria guided students, and they were able to see quite clearly how they were graded. Thus, although participants could estimate their performance in general, they found difficulty in assigning marks

to their tasks. This is inconsistent with Ying's (2002) study where she found that students were able to self-assess fairly accurately in Web-based projects.

None of the participants could comment to any great extent on their ability to assess online work, primarily because only face-to-face work was assessed in the project, and the online work was supplementary. As explained previously, this was because all Foundation in English students were given the same assessment tasks, and I was only working with one tutorial group. I return to this point later in Chapter 8.

### **7.13 Participants' persistence in learning**

Self-directed learners are reflected in research in the area as being persistent (for example, Toyoda's (2001) study). In my study, the majority (fifteen) of the participants said they considered themselves persistent in their learning, meaning that they did not give up easily if they encountered something difficult in the learning process. Five participants said that under certain circumstances, they tended to give up.

The persistent learners said that they generally kept trying, although they might ask a lecturer or other students for help, for instance:

- Precious:* No, I don't give up, I keep trying always, that is my style. It's not good to give up then you won't learn anything. You won't be here (13.9.2004).
- Lucky:* I don't like to give up in any single day, never. What I don't know I have to find ways of getting the answer. Let me give you an example. In mathematics in school I could not sleep if I didn't know the solution. I would try and try, even for one solution, then apply it to others (14.9.2004).
- Mabela:* If I don't understand, I read, repeat, then I ask, I don't give up, ever. Even on the Internet, I look and look. Maybe change the key words (14.9.2004).
- Sibo:* To give up is to admit defeat. We must go on, give it the best shot. Then we know we have at least tried (14.9.2004).
- Nothando:* No, I don't give up (laughs) My mum always told me that. Face challenges, don't run away from them. Don't deny, don't be nervous. Just ask for help. Everyone is the same (16.9.2004).

With regard to the Net and online environments, the group generally felt similarly, although Lucky felt that although he would not give up, if time did not permit he would have to. However, he would resume the task at a later stage. As discussed in Chapter 5 on access and proficiency, participants felt that ICT access is limited on campus. Because of their busy schedules, and the time spent travelling, many of them did not have much time to spend on computers. This was partially the reason why many of the participants said they could not persist in their learning. Mabela suggested a change of tactic by changing key words, for example, and he also felt that the Net enabled students to search further if there was something they did not understand.

Of the participants who said they would not persist, Farzana felt that interest was important, for instance, if she were not interested in what she was studying, or looking up on the Net, she would not persist:

*Farzana:* Sometimes, depends on interest. Sometimes...depends if I have any interest in it. If I don't, I don't try too hard.... I would leave it. Even on the Net (26.8.2004).

Lindiwe felt that she would give up, particularly on the Net: "But on the Internet maybe I will lose interest and give up. There are other ways of getting the information (16.9.2004).

The majority of the participants claimed to be persistent in their learning. However, they reported that they tended to give up if they were in an online environment if they experienced technical problems, or if they did not have sufficient time. Some stated that they would continue at another time if this occurred. I also observed persistence in certain students, such as Elsie, who made appointments to consult, and asked for help from other students in her determination to succeed in the online component.

#### 7.14 Participants' ability to manage time

In relation to the final characteristic, autonomous learners are said to be good managers of time. All the participants felt that they could manage their time under general learning conditions. However, when they were exposed to online practices, the majority (fourteen participants, or 70%) felt that it was impossible to manage time effectively.

Of the six who felt they could manage their time on the Net, all expressed their ability to set limits on their time. This was problematic in the initial stages, when they said they spent excessive time browsing on the Net. For instance, Blessing commented on the need for control:

But you must have a time. In the beginning I would sit too long. Now I am controlling it better. You must be in charge of the Internet (27.9.2004).

Blessing's comment that users need to be 'in charge' indicates her feelings that the Net should not be allowed to dominate users, and that they should be able to set limits. She believed that users should be more autonomous in their use of the Net.

The remaining sixteen participants were in agreement that they spent far too much time on the Net because it was distracting, or the computers were slow, or because of the breadth of information available. A few comments to support these views follow:

- Leila:* How do you manage your time when you are on the Internet? Is it easy to manage time?
- Zinhle:* (Laughs) No, when you switch on the Internet you get hooked to it. Addicted...(not clear). It's hard to leave. Even if you have to move you find yourself moving at 12 o'clock even if you have a class at that time.
- Leila:* But is it because you are looking at something relevant to your learning?
- Zinhle:* Sometimes when you are using it for learning you want to carry on, but it's also hard for entertainment (15.9.2004).
- Adam:* I don't see the disadvantage, but time is a problem. When you spend a lot of time on the computer you forget about everything else. You might spend up to three hours and end up missing classes even (laughs). The good part is you get to learn about

- other people's view and that. You voice your opinions. Even with penpals. In terms of language as well. It improves – you can express yourself better (15.9.2004).
- Mbali:* As I said, not always...but I will do so.
- Leila:* On the Net?
- Mbali:* Whew, this is hard, you want to play and play, everything you click will take you somewhere, then you forget time (1.10.2004).

Several participants had the view that the Net was addictive, especially when they were still getting used to it, to the extent that they 'bunked' classes to continue using the Net (for example, Adam). Mbali, for example comments on the hyperlinks "everything you click will take you somewhere", which could detract from learning if students are not sufficiently focused. This is a point made also by Yates (1996) and Goodman and Graddol (1996), that reading is no longer linear on the Net, which could distract users. On the whole, the majority of the students in my study had been using ICT in their learning for the first time in the year the project was being conducted. As such they were still distracted by the extent of the information available and found that this resulted in their spending excessive time on the computers, sometimes to the detriment of class time. They were also distracted by sites that were not entirely relevant to what set out to study.

### **7.15 Observations on independence, *Nicenet*, and participant preferences**

The use of online practices in this study demonstrates that participants perceive the online environment to support learner autonomy quite extensively, although the results cannot be generalised because the participant sample size is not extensive. For the most part students commented that the use of online practices facilitated their independence in learning. Herman, for instance, equated the experience to self-access learning, where a teacher did not need to be physically present:

- Leila:* And might the Net help you be independent?
- Herman:* I think so, yes, because it is like self-access. You do your work and you don't need a teacher (22.8.2004).

The participants felt that they benefited from the fact that they could work at their own pace, without a teacher, as well as improve their English. The need for discipline and focus emerged once again, in relation to time management. Finally, Mbali cautioned that while students could work on computers and use the Net for their learning, contact with teachers was still vital:

Yes, yes...I am independent, but maybe the Internet will make us too independent. Then what will happen to teachers? We still need teachers. If we rely only on computers, who will explain? We must not lose one hundred percent contact (1.10.2004).

Other participants echoed this view that they needed face-to-face contact to learn effectively, and saw the teacher, not as dominating the classroom, but as a facilitator, moreso to provide technical assistance should they have online classes. This is fitting with earlier discussions on the role of the teacher in the online environment. The role of the teacher changes from one who imparts knowledge, to one who is more of a facilitator of the learning process. However, this is not limited to technical assistance, as participants seem to think.

On the whole, participants felt they learnt a great deal from the Nicenet class. In some cases they found the experience challenging, and said that it contributed to their learning, in terms of improving their English. They also found use of the Net beneficial because it is a novel medium that provides local and global exposure.

As discussed earlier Salaberry (in Bordonaro, 2003) cautions against interpreting interest based on novelty as learning. However, this point remained one of the key issues brought up by participants. Lucky said:

*Lucky:* I can say all the *Nicenet* work we did was new for me. I never did it before, I never knew that we can communicate as a class on the Internet. I learnt that. Maybe everyone can do this. But ja, we need face-to-face too... it's easy. The thing with Internet is you have to type first and then it has to be sent to someone, then you have

to wait and then a person has to respond as well. You have to read the response of the first student, the second student, the third student. You know, its not easy like hearing or when you are speaking face-to-face. However, the thing is also you can find something on the Internet and discuss it in class, face-to-face.

*Leila:* We can also put a time limit for when students can respond, like a week.

*Lucky:* That would be good (14.9.2004).

As this was all the participants' first interaction with the Net as a teaching-learning tool in the classroom, I was not surprised that the novelty motivated and appealed to them. Had such practices been utilized in other classes, I have no doubt that they would have been more critical of the practice. Lucky was also not alone in his comments on the need for immediate feedback. Often participants would post messages in response to an earlier posting. However, as discussed in the linguistic analysis of messages in the previous chapter, their messages appeared as isolated posts, and were not directly addressed to a particular sender, which is contradictory to the norms of conversational flow and turn taking (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975).

Several participants also spoke about the improvement in their English. Blessing and Zinhle said:

*Blessing:* With English *Nicenet* is good...you read ...write. Even read the articles and summaries....it's an understanding first. You think about the argument, like in class. And others contribute to your point. Yes, I think your English improves a lot (27.9.2004).

*Zinhle:* What can I say is in English *Nicenet* can help me, when I have to find anything. Like how to contact you if there is anything, questions, how to consult with articles, how to do arguments. If students have questions. It is a good idea. It's new but we are still learning (15.9.2004).

In relation to the improvement in English, I did not evaluate participants' improvement, a shortcoming I discuss in the conclusion of this thesis. However, on monitoring the discussion threads, I could see that participants were beginning to express themselves more coherently as they became more comfortable with the medium. I also observed that they used many of the arguments from the discussion

threads as key points in their examination essays at the end of the year. As discussed in the previous chapter, however, I also noticed the growing tendency to use Netspeak, which is a combination of spoken and written language, including the use of abbreviations, contractions and emoticons, which some feel could detract from academic English usage.

Another theme that emerged among what participants considered beneficial in using the Net is the local and global exposure through technology. Blessing said:

I learnt a lot. You said other countries are doing this, even in South Africa. We should learn new technology. It will also help other courses. Like some universities are already doing this in all their courses. Maybe the lecturers need to be familiar with the technology (27.9.2004).

Several participants commented on the use of technology bringing people together and bridging gaps. There was a general feeling that they should be utilizing technology in their learning to the same extent that it was being used overseas. Blessing's comment on other universities using technology is a reference to the use of *WebCT* at Rand Afrikaans University in Johannesburg. *WebCT* is also being used in some of the faculties at the University of the Witwatersrand, but is not currently common practice across the university. One point that emerges in the literature is teacher under-preparedness for the use of technology in the classroom (SAIDE 2000, 2003). Studies, such as those by Cronje and Murdoch (2001) at Rand Afrikaans University in South Africa also show that lecturers felt that they were insufficiently trained and they were not given incentives to use technology.

In relation to their overall preference for face-to-face classes, online classes, or a dual mode system of delivery, participants responded as follows: thirteen (65%) preferred a face-to-face mode of delivery, two (10%) preferred online delivery, and five (25%)

preferred the dual mode. The reasons for preferring face-to-face classes included interaction as a class (Precious, Farzana, Elsie), English improvement (Farzana, Natalie), and contact with the teacher (Mabela, Lindiwe, Mbali). Leonard and Sibon felt that they did not enjoy waiting for feedback, which took some time in an asynchronous environment, while Ernest believed that new students benefited from a face-to-face mode, but that more mature students who are more technologically literate could cope well in an online environment. Xing and Lucky preferred the online mode, with Lucky reflecting that was the new way to go. Xing preferred to work alone, rather than in a face-to-face environment, therefore the online medium suited his needs, although he said that he would need a teacher for guidance. Herman, Oscar, Nothando, Zinhle and Adam believed that a mixed mode of delivery was suitable as it gave students more access to the teacher, as well as to the other students, and that it catered for different student needs. Adam said:

I think we need both, contact is good for learning. We have contact on *Nicenet*, but only if everyone in class knows more the way to do it so it is useful. It is important to learn new things if other people are doing this everywhere even in schools, we need to know the skills too (15.9.2004).

#### **7.16 Reflections on learner autonomy**

In relation to the characteristics established by Guglielmino (1977, 1997) and Knowles (1975), participants perceived themselves to be self-directed or autonomous in all the specified characteristics in conventional face-to-face learning spaces. In online spaces the participants also appeared to be self-directed, however, not to the same extent as in the face-to-face environment.

When interviewed most participants believed that the online environment facilitated autonomy in terms of the following nine categories: enjoyment and curiosity for learning, ability to develop new ideas, ability to face challenges in learning, ability to

locate resources, ability to use strategies, ability to retain information, ability to relate the known to the unknown, ability to think critically, and ability to persist in learning.

The majority of the participants felt they did not display the following five characteristics, considered essential for autonomy by Guglielmino (1977, 1997) and Knowles (1975), in the online environment:

- Ability to work alone and in groups: There was some misunderstanding about group and individual work. Most participants appeared to prefer working alone in the online environments, and did not think it possible to work on group or team online projects. Working on group projects, however, does not necessarily entail physically working in groups on computers, but refers instead to a collaborative effort. Since the only collaboration in OLEP involved participation in discussion threads and with e-pals, participants were not able to experience fully collaborative projects, such as the design of web pages. However, Oscar and Xing both said that, in order to succeed, all the participants should collaborate on the discussion threads and with e-pals. The only way in which participants tended to work together online was if they needed technical support or assistance.
- Responsibility for learning: Although participants felt that learners should bear responsibility for learning in traditional settings, believed felt that teachers should play a more active role in the online setting. This was because they felt they needed more support, especially in the initial stages of their work with technology. They also felt that this was especially true for students who were new to the University.
- Formulating learning goals: The majority of participants could not comment in this section because they were not clear on how the Net could help them formulate learning goals. Only four participants believed they could formulate goals because they felt that using the Net could speed up the learning process because of the extra work that could be done independently.
- Assessing progress: The nature of the project involved voluntary participation, and did not involve assessment tasks *per se*. Students were able to assess their progress in general in the online environment, but did not know how to use the Net to their advantage when assessing their work.
- Time management: This proved to be one of the more problematic characteristics. Although participants felt they could manage time under normal circumstances, they found they were too distracted and often exceeded time limits on the Net.

There are two issues that should be noted in this chapter: first, the cultural implications of autonomy, and second, participants' former DET school experiences.

The first issue, as also discussed by Thang (2001, 2005)<sup>187</sup> is that autonomy is usually measured using Western characteristics. Characteristics such as 'questioning the teacher' could be considered disrespectful in cultures where teachers are revered. Although participants in my study displayed most of the characteristics of autonomy from a Western perspective, their not displaying particular features, does not

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<sup>187</sup> Thang's (2001, 2005) studies are discussed in Chapter 3.

necessarily mean that they are not autonomous from an African perspective. Thus, Thang's (2001, 2005) call to bear in mind the sociocultural factors which influence autonomy must be emphasised.

The second issue, participants' former DET experiences, appears to have had a strong influence on learning styles. Features such as 'critical thinking' and 'challenges in learning' appear not to have been nurtured in participants' school experiences, which, as I explained earlier, could be a consequence of teachers' DET experiences. This, together with the African belief of holding teachers in high esteem might detract from a Western concept of autonomy.

Participants in my study generally considered the online environment as enabling learner-autonomy. In order to facilitate learner autonomy in online environments, the following are necessary: access to reliable technology; computer literacy among teachers and learners; peer communication and support (see also Toyoda, 2001); setting tasks to incorporate multiple teaching-learning strategies in online classes; establishing goal-setting practices among learners; providing integrated assessment tasks; and time management skills.

Chapter 8, in which I consider the limitations and recommendations of this study, concludes this thesis on online communities of practice,

**PART IV:**

**Conclusions and implications for teaching, learning, and  
further research**

## CHAPTER 8

### Online communities of practice: From disadvantage to empowerment

#### 8.1 Introduction

Given that multimedia ICT modes of delivery are emerging in South Africa's educational landscape, my study posed questions about the use of ICT from the perspective of learners with minimal previous access and exposure to the medium. In particular, the study asked the question "To what extent do English non-mother tongue speakers in a university English classroom engage in communities of practice in online spaces?" To answer this main question, I posed sub-questions about participants' electronic literacy practices to establish an overview of their previous ICT-practice, and its influence on their current ICT-practice. Having established that COPs involve the building of relationships, interactive networks among participants, and how they construct their identities, I also asked questions concerning the relationships they develop and sustain in online COPs, and how they construct their identities in the new online medium. Finally, based on my own, as well as the findings' of other researchers<sup>188</sup>, I examined participants' perceptions of autonomy as facilitated by the online component.

The study is situated at the interface of online learning, language and literacy studies, and learning theory, and is further underpinned, from a critical perspective, by issues of power within a digital divide. I argued that students with access to, and proficiency in technology are privileged and empowered by the higher education system, and better prepared for future career and economic success. I also argued that the power struggles surrounding the use of ICT in South Africa parallel the struggles around the

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<sup>188</sup> For example, the findings of Ying (2002), Kurek (2002), Fang and Warschauer (2004), and Toyoda (2001).

use of English in the country. Thus, participants were doubly disadvantaged, being non-mother-tongue speakers of English in an environment dominated by the language, as well as having minimal previous access to ICT, both of which are dominant discourses of the university community.

In this concluding chapter I summarise my findings and reflect on their implications for further research and teaching using technology in higher education. Then I return to the over-arching question to establish the extent to which English non-mother tongue speakers in a university English classroom engage in communities of practice in online spaces. I do not suggest that my study has all the answers on online COPs, and therefore acknowledge the limitations of the study, and make recommendations for practice and further research. I conclude this study by suggesting a model for online learning in English in South Africa.

## **8.2 Summarising findings and reflections on online COPs**

### *8.2.1 Electronic (ICT)-literacy as social practice*

Drawing on the work of Barton *et al* (2000), various works by Street (1984, 1993, 1998, 2003), and Gee (1996, 1997, 2000), who suggest that literacy is not a skill, but a social practice that is embedded in broader social goals, the following emerged in my research: the majority of participants had minimal access to ICT at home and at their former high schools, and that their ICT-proficiency, when they entered the university, was also minimal. Access at school was limited to principals, and sometimes teachers, who were not proficient with ICT themselves, and if there was access in the home environment, the computer was feared and revered. However, participants noted that their former high schools were beginning to acquire ICT through external donors. ICT access at university was considered far superior to access at home or at school, but

was not considered ideal as the computer laboratories were often overcrowded, and the number of computers available was insufficient for the number of students.

Theorists argue that different literacies are associated with different domains of life, and that literacy practices are patterned by power relationships and social institutions. This became evident in participants' feelings of marginalisation within the dominant academic discourses of the university, in this case, a discourse of technological proficiency. Most experienced this as disabling to the extent that it created a divide between them and Indian and white students, whom they considered privileged by apartheid. The digital divide, which students viewed as a legacy of South Africa's apartheid past, was thus a pervasive presence, not just in the communities from which participants came, but very much so at the University. However, participants who were independent and motivated appeared to overcome these gaps and attain the ICT-skills and proficiency necessary to succeed quite rapidly.

On the whole, participants found that the Net and the online component offered diverse benefits, including access to unlimited information, ease of use, facilitation of contact, and some found a general improvement in English skills such as reading and writing. The disadvantages they reported included technophobia, lack of skills, limited access, outdated technology, poor time management and 'laziness'. The divide appeared to perpetuate feelings of inclusion-exclusion among participants. One of the most significant fears expressed by participants is that the lack of access to technology could impact negatively on their future commercial, material, and economic prospects, thus widening the divide. I consider this fear to be an obstacle that, in my experience, has already made an impact on participants' academic lives.

### 8.2.2 *Online communities of practice: Relationships and participation*

In COPs, the acquisition of knowledge is seen as a social process, where novices to the community participate peripherally until they are assisted by more experienced participants. My study showed that participants were able to participate in diverse communities of practice simultaneously in the online environment. The communities established transcended the boundaries of the conventional face-to-face class, and students participated in public interactions and relationships within the Foundation in English online class; in private communities established outside of the online class; and finally, in global communities, where four participants communicated with international e-pals. However, participation alone does not generate a COP. The establishment of relationships, which is intrinsic to communities, was enabled as participants assisted one another from peripheral to full participation.

Participants established and sustained relationships, reminiscent of Rheingold's comment on "webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold, 2000: online, 6 of 16). They also maintained social contact with the lecturer, with one another, and with international students in China, thus diminishing boundaries, and narrowing social distance. They participated peripherally, and with assistance from other students and the facilitator, they became more active participants, by posting messages on the weekly discussion threads. This is consistent with Lave and Wenger's (1991, 1996, 2002) legitimate peripheral participation, as well as Rogoff's (2003) description of guided participation. Their messages included social messages, research queries and research updates.

What I also found interesting was participants' use of language. Researchers such as Ong (1982) in Murray (2000); Yates (1996); Crystal (2001); and Moran and Hawisher

(1998) show that computer-mediated communication (CMC) contains both oral and written linguistic features. In addition, Warschauer (2004a) and Murray (2000) found that CMC users employ time-reducing strategies to write the messages and substitute for the lack of paralinguistic and non-verbal cues. My findings are consistent with the researchers' findings on the language used in CMC. Participants used emoticons, abbreviations, and substituted numbers for words in an attempt to construct social presence, simplify their messages, and create an ambience of non-verbal communication, demonstrating that the online medium facilitates the construction of identities textually within COPs (refer also to Lam, 2000). These findings have implications for the teaching and learning of English language, and rather than being considered as debasing the English language, computer-mediated communication has emerged as a new register in the English language curriculum.

### *8.2.3 Constructing online identities*

Identities may be constructed through personality, social roles, relationships, shared values, and language use. In this study, I set out to examine how participants constructed identities in the new online space. I drew on the work of Lam (2000) who argued that the attraction of CMC is the variety of options it offers participants in designing their identities. In virtual environments, therefore, identities may be constructed through participants' use of language, names and social cues, such as emoticons. Having examined their use of names, nicknames and social cues, I found these had a minimal influence on how they constructed their identities, and argued that this occurred because of the novelty of the medium. I found that participants constructed their identities more strongly in relation to how they positioned themselves in relation to sociocultural issues evident in class themes and readings, such as polygamy.

In the online medium, and characteristic of post-modern thought (Hall, 1992), participants positioned themselves as adaptive in response to the material and technological changes in their learning environment. They felt a sense of dislocation, not having used ICT extensively before, but believed the medium as accorded them status and privilege as students. Their constructions of identity are also consistent with Norton (Pierce's) (1995, 1996, 2000) views, that identity refers to how people understand their relationships in the world, and how those relationships are constructed over space and time.

The online environment facilitated learner participation, negotiation and re-negotiation of meaning within communities of practice. The communities established moved beyond the conventional face-to-face class, with participants constructing their identities in different layers. Participants established relationships, and created networks with the facilitator and with one another, and, in some cases, with global partners, thus diminishing boundaries, and narrowing social distance. They participated peripherally, and with assistance and co-operation from other students and the facilitator, became more active participants. This has also implications for the teaching and learning of English. From a sociocultural perspective, and recognizing that the learning of English does not occur in isolation, learners acquire the language because of how they construct themselves, and because of how they interact using the language. Thus, learner-identities, relationships, and communities are valuable considerations in online communities of practice.

#### 8.2.4 *Perceptions of learner autonomy*

Participants perceived themselves to be self-directed or autonomous in all the specified characteristics in traditional face-to-face learning spaces, in relation to the characteristics established by Guglielmino (1977, 1997) and Knowles (1975). In online spaces, the participants perceived themselves autonomous, although not to the same extent as in the face-to-face environment.

When interviewed, most participants felt that the online environment facilitated autonomy in relation to the following nine categories: enjoyment of, and curiosity for learning; ability to develop new ideas; ability to face challenges in learning; ability to locate resources; ability to use learning strategies; ability to retain information; ability to relate the known to the unknown; ability to think critically; and ability to persist in learning.

The majority of the participants felt that the online environment did not enable the following five characteristics, considered essential for autonomy by Guglielmino (1977, 1997) and Knowles (1975): ability to work alone and in groups; responsibility for learning; formulating learning goals; assessing progress; and time management. It was also noted that the features characterising autonomy constitute a Western perspective. Thus if learners from other cultural backgrounds do not display all the characteristics, this does not necessarily imply that they are not autonomous. This finding has implications for research towards the design of a model for autonomy that takes into consideration sociocultural factors.

In my study the online environment facilitated the construction of online communities of practice to the following extent: first, participants were able to form and sustain

relationships in multiple online COPs, and diminish social boundaries in the process. Second, participants were able to construct online identities in three ways. To a lesser extent, they used linguistic features such as names, nicknames and social cues, and to a greater extent, they were able to construct their identities by positioning themselves as empowered when they had access to ICT. Using discussion threads, participants were further able to construct identities textually in relation to course themes. Third, participants perceived, to a large extent, that the online environment facilitated learner autonomy.

### **8.3 Limitations of the study**

While I have provided some suggestions concerning the questions I posed for this research, I acknowledge that this study is not without shortcomings or limitations. Foremost, I did not have control over the Foundation in English curriculum. The Foundation in English course has been taught at the university since 1992, although the approach and content had been adapted over the years. As such, I could not add additional readings and tasks for my tutorial group, without influencing the work done with other tutorial groups. On the same note, I was only able to institute the online intervention with my tutorial group, and could not include other groups in the experience, as I did not have the resources to conduct the intervention with all the students, nor could other tutors be expected to cope with the task.

Second, the fact that all tutorial groups had to do the same tasks influenced what I considered one of the strongest limitations, that of assessment. The online component was not assessed, as assessment tasks had to be consistent across all the tutorial groups. I was thus limited by the voluntary nature of the project, in the sense that I

could not motivate or encourage students to participate for marks, which might have had a more positive impact on motivating them to participate<sup>189</sup>.

A third related limitation is the minimal participation in the e-pal project, where only four of the thirteen participants maintained e-pal contact. Because of the voluntary nature of the project, and because assessment tasks were not included, I was not able to successfully motivate more students to participate, which could have resulted in richer data in the section 'Communities beyond' (Chapter 6).

Fourth, in relation to sustaining online participation, I was informed by two participants that they lost interest in the online component because I did not update posts to the class on a daily basis. This demotivated them from participating as they logged onto the online class daily. The intention behind not updating posts daily was so as not to overwhelm less active participants. However, it had a negative impact on more active participants.

Finally, in relation to specific English skills, some of the participants noted that the online component had a positive effect on their reading and writing skills. It was not my intention at the outset of this project to assess the possible improvement in English skills. However, considering that some of the participants raised the issue of the improvement in reading and writing skills, had I included pre-and post-tests to ascertain the possible improvement in English language skills, I would have been able to assess the improvement or decline in such skills, rather than having to rely on self-report data.

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<sup>189</sup> Hodgkinson-Williams (2005:95) cites Macdonald (2003:377) who underscores the importance of assessment in "ensuring online participation".

The findings and limitations discussed thus far give rise to recommendations of the study, as well as recommendations for further research, which are discussed in the sections to follow.

#### **8.4 Recommendations of the study**

The findings of this study indicate that COPs are enabled in online environments, through the development of participant-networks, the construction of identities, and through enabling learner autonomy. On the basis of these findings, this study recommends that online learning be considered, for the reasons provided below, as an additional delivery mode, and to promote teacher-learner and learner-learner collaboration, networking and interaction, particularly in higher education English classrooms at university level. Thus, like O'Dowd (2000) and Kern and Warschauer (2000) I recommend that an electronic literacy approach be taken by integrating electronic literacy into English language teaching and learning in the higher education classroom.

While it is problematic to recommend that higher education institutions in South Africa integrate ICT into teaching programmes merely because developed countries have done so, particular notice should be taken of South Africa as a developing country, and its possible exclusion from global networks, should it not embrace technology. As Warschauer (2002a; 2002b; 2003) argues, for developing countries in particular, technology should serve the enabling purpose of social inclusion.

I recommend foremost that a central unit or Technology Centre be established at the University to steer the incorporation of technology into teaching and learning at the

levels of policy, practice, and curriculum. At present ICT initiatives are implemented in an *ad hoc* manner, which is inconsistent across the University. With this in mind, the recommendations are categorised into three areas: policy and practice; curriculum design; and recommendations for facilitators and learners, all of which could be driven by the Technology Centre.

#### 8.4.1 *Policy and practice*

While educational policies at national level recommend the use of ICT, it is short-sighted to assume that their recommendations will be implemented successfully, unless they feed into institutional policies. The existence of sound ICT-policy and planning for technology at an institutional level would ensure a consistent university-wide approach, rather than if the integration of ICT into teaching and learning activities were conducted in an *ad hoc* manner, as is current practice<sup>190</sup>. Chapter 5 explains that ICT-policy at the University of the Witwatersrand does not exist, and that the use of ICT in teaching and learning is not preferred practice in the School of Literature and Language Studies at the University. Learners, however, are keen to embrace technology, suggesting that the role of a Technology Centre should, in part, be to drive issues such as ICT-policy and implementation.

The University would need the technological infrastructure to cope with the demands of using ICT in teaching and learning, as is evident from participants' comments on the limited access to technology at the University, in Chapter 5. Commitment from management is necessary in order to provide the necessary infrastructure, as well as technical support, which would enable autonomous learning and research, as is shown

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<sup>190</sup> Although units specialising in research and practice in multimedia have been established at certain universities, such as the Centre for Educational Technology and the Multimedia Education Group at the University of Cape Town, this is not standard practice at universities across South Africa.

in Chapter 7. Teachers are also more likely to adopt ICT in their teaching if they feel secure that the infrastructural framework is made available. Finally, a University-wide audit of current teaching practice that incorporates the use of ICT would provide an overview of what staff are using across the faculties. This, together with an analysis of staff, as well as students' ICT access and proficiency would provide a suitable framework for future planning.

#### *8.4.2 Curriculum design*

To maximise the benefits of online learning, as is discussed in Chapter 2, it is crucial for the English language teacher to consider how ICT can best be integrated into the English language curriculum. The integration of ICT should not be adopted merely because teaching staff feel pressurized into doing so. Teachers need to be made aware of the benefits of online learning from University teaching-support services to reflect on ways in which ICT can best be integrated into the curriculum. This is not to suggest that all face-to-face teaching be replaced with online strategies, or that this occurs only in the English classroom. Input should be made to promote a model that blends face-to-face and online practices, with due concern for what is best for the curriculum, facilitator and learner. This would require careful planning as well as teacher-development in ICT skills, practices and pedagogies, all of which could be supervised by the Technology Centre.

#### *8.4.3 Facilitators and learners*

Kurek (2002) argues "New conditions pose new challenges and call for new skills, yet it needs to be stressed that computers can never substitute teachers. On the contrary, they can offer them new opportunities for better language instruction" (Kurek, 2002:26). While computers cannot replace good teachers, where ICT is used,

it is inevitable that teachers will need professional and technological development and support. Berge (1995), for example, categorises the conditions necessary for successful online facilitation as pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical conditions.

In relation to pedagogy, facilitators should use questions that focus discussions on critical concepts, principles and skills. On a social level, facilitators should maintain a friendly, social environment to promote learning, human relationships and group cohesiveness. The managerial role involves managing the online learning experience effectively by setting objectives, managing online materials and discussion, and making decisions where necessary. With regard to technical expertise, while not every teacher cannot be expected to be a technical expert, it is the responsibility of the facilitator to ensure that students feel comfortable with the medium, for instance, by providing them with user-friendly handouts. This is particularly true for students who have had minimal previous access to ICT. Teachers need to provide students with the support necessary for successful online interaction so that students do not feel overwhelmed by the tasks they are required to complete. Thus I recommend that the facilitator adopt a community of practice approach that encourages participants to collaborate, communicate, construct identities, and be autonomous.

Teachers too would benefit from communities of practice. To allay anxieties about the integration of ICT into teaching and learning, the development of teacher networks and ICT interest groups, would be an advantage. Teachers could communicate through special interest networks or listservs (such as the TESL listservs) about common concerns, as also recommended by Kahmi-Stein (2000) and Murphy (2000).

The following recommendations refer specifically to facilitators who are new to integrating ICT in the classroom:

- teachers who would like to start implementing ICT in the classroom should start at a manageable scale, for example, by referring to Internet sites as reference material during lessons;
- students should be encouraged to use technology to complete tasks, for example, by asking them to access websites to complete assignments;
- students should also be taught to evaluate websites critically, so that they can make informed choices of available material; and
- teachers and teacher-trainees should be encouraged to develop their own skills as new technology is introduced, and filter these skills to students<sup>191</sup>.

For teachers new to teaching online, the following points are recommended for successful online web course facilitation:

- students should be given clear instructions about joining and participating in online classes;
- students should be made aware of netiquette, or acceptable online behaviour;
- material should be organised logically so as not to confuse students;
- general housekeeping should be done regularly so that messages appear in the correct threads, if not, they should be moved. It is confusing to students to have to read messages that are posted to incorrect threads; and
- teachers should only commit according to the time they have available. Students cannot be expected to participate if the teacher does not have time to respond to all participants<sup>192</sup>.

It is inevitable that with the increasing introduction of ICT to schools<sup>193</sup>, including formerly under-resourced schools, learners entering universities will shortly do so with appropriate computer literacy skills, provided that teachers are trained as well. Thus it is inevitable that teacher education departments at universities and colleges offer courses in ICT and electronic literacy to teacher-trainees, as well as to teachers already in the education system. Until then, universities should attempt to bridge inequities that marginalize students from under-resourced environments and ensure that all students have access to computer literacy training, rather than in the *ad hoc* manner in which it is currently approached, as was described in Chapter 5.

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<sup>191</sup> Refer also to the University of Chattanooga website [www.utc.edu/Teaching-Resource-Center/5things.html](http://www.utc.edu/Teaching-Resource-Center/5things.html)

<sup>192</sup> Refer also to Kessler (2001).

<sup>193</sup> This was discussed in Chapter 5.

## 8.5 Implications for further research

Because the use of online interventions is fairly uncharted territory in South Africa, the research possibilities are unlimited, and studies on online learning in the English classroom undertaken internationally can be duplicated in the South African context. Of particular interest in the South African context is the use of online interventions for social inclusion, to bridge the digital divide, and the related power issues involved.

Van der Merwe (2005), in her study of the evaluation of *WebCT* at the University of Stellenbosch, recommends the need for research into classroom practice. Although not directly in response to her recommendation for further research, this study points to the need to address classroom practice as a gap created by the sporadic implementation of ICT-based teaching in South Africa. Bearing in mind that this small-scale study into online communities of practice is not generalisable to the larger student bodies in South Africa, I recommend further research into online classes, with specific focus on communities of practice, networking among participants, the identities they construct, and its possibilities for promoting autonomy.

I believe that my research study has unlocked possibilities for research in the areas of online environments, online participants, and to an extent, language use. Further research into what constitutes a successful teaching-learning online environment would be of benefit to all teachers, teacher-trainers, teacher-trainees, and course designers, as would studies of who are successful online teachers and learners. In the former instance, research might be conducted into web courses that are considered effective in relation to learner success and achievement. In the latter instance, specific teacher-and learner-characteristics and attributes would require careful examination. In relation to language studies, in particular, as demonstrated in the section on

limitations, I would be interested in the possible improvement in English language skills, as a result of using online interventions in the English class. I would also be interested in studies that investigate the use of other online interventions in the English language classroom, as well as how these online interventions are assessed. Finally, with the increasing introduction of ICT into schools from donor agencies and organisations, I would recommend long term case studies of how teachers, learners and schools are being prepared for the integration of ICT into curricula, and how ICT is being used, especially as a means of social inclusion. Drawing on the recommendations made in this thesis, as well as the suggestions for further research, the final section proposes a model for ICT and learning in South Africa.

#### **8.6 Towards a model of ICT and learning in South Africa**

To the extent that my thesis has made recommendations for the integration of ICT into policy and the curriculum, it also has further implications for learning. While recommendations derived from research conducted elsewhere have generally been made for the use of ICT in western North American contexts, I believe that a model that takes into consideration the South African sociocultural context might be beneficial for online teaching and learning. Such a model might include the following characteristics:

- a community of practice approach to teaching and learning online;
- an examination of ICT-literacy as social practice;
- the creation of an environment which enables learners to construct their identities and position themselves in relation to the use of ICT; and
- the creation of an environment that encourages learners to be autonomous, from a cultural perspective.

In relation to the first characteristic, Vygotsky (1978) suggests that individuals learn through interacting and negotiating meaning with other individuals and more knowledgeable peers in social situations. Similarly, Lave and Wenger (1991, 1996, 2002) suggest that the establishment of relationships is intrinsic to communities of practice. Thus communities of practice are enabled as participants assist one another from peripheral to full participation. In the South African context, a framework for online learning designed around community of practice principles (including participation, interaction, development and sustaining of relationships, mentorship and assistance, autonomy, and the negotiation of meaning) is appropriate, especially in the light of the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, as referred to in Chapter 6<sup>194</sup>.

Second, drawing on the work of Gee (1996, 1997, 2000), Street (1984, 1993, 1998, 2003), Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic (2000), Lankshear and Knobel (1997, 2004) and Knobel and Lankshear (2002), literacy as social practice theory demonstrates the value of considering learners' social practices with ICT as a lens through which to view their use of technology in the classroom. In my research, the majority of participants came from disadvantaged, under-resourced backgrounds, with little previous access to computers and the Internet. Social practice theory therefore highlights the influence of learners' home and school encounters with ICT, which impacts on their ICT-practices at university.

Third, identities, as described in the work of Hall (1992), Lam (2000), and Norton (Pierce) (1995, 1997, 2000) may be constructed through personality, social roles, relationships, shared values, and language use. Thus, how learners construct and

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<sup>194</sup> *Ubuntu* refers to mutual reliance on other people, and communal identity.

position themselves in relation to ICT and sociocultural issues discussed in the online space are significant to consider in any online learning environment.

Fourth, the online environment is said to promote learner autonomy (Ying, 2002; Kurek, 2002; Spratt *et al*, 2002; and Toyoda, 2001). However, autonomy is more often than not perceived from a western perspective, and learners who do not display western characteristics of autonomy are thought to be lacking in this quality. My research suggests that it is necessary to approach autonomy and learning from a cultural perspective, and to move towards an African framework of the concept.

Although my research on an online intervention demonstrates that successful communities of practice are enabled in online environments, through participant networking, the construction of identities, and autonomous learning, I cannot claim to have authoritative solutions to all the questions and dilemmas raised in the course of this thesis. Technology should, in fact, enhance the curriculum, not dictate it. As Warschauer (2000a) says “Technology itself does not *determine* human behavior, such as how we teach. However, it does create the possibilities for new forms of behavior and of education” (2000a, 1 of 6). The research in this thesis demonstrates that online COPs represent a shift from the dominant role of the teacher, to enabling learners to take greater responsibility, independence, and opportunity for critical thinking, thus creating a more democratic teaching-learning environment. Furthermore, my research shows that using a framework of technology for social inclusion empowers participants, who otherwise feel marginalised and disempowered, not only by introducing technology into under-resourced contexts, but by exploring issues such as networking, identity and autonomy, which are fundamental to online communication and communities of practice.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1

<b>Preliminary survey questionnaire to lecturers</b>
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**Section One: Biographical details** (For statistical purposes only)

Name (optional): \_\_\_\_\_  
 Institution: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Department: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Position in department: \_\_\_\_\_

**Section Two: ICT use**

1. Do you have regular access to a computer? (please tick)

	Yes	No
At home		
At work		

2. Do you have regular access to the Internet?

	Yes	No
At home		
At your Institution		

3. Does your department have a computer laboratory?

Yes	
No	

4. To what extent are you proficient in: (1 = very proficient, 4 = not at all proficient)

	1	2	3	4
Using a computer				
Using the Internet				
Using e-mail				

5. Approximately how many students do you teach per class?

Under 10	
11-20	
21-30	
31-40	
More than 40	

6. To your knowledge, do your students have regular access to computers?

	Yes	No	Not sure
At home			
At your institution			

7. Do your students have regular access to the Internet:?

	Yes	No	Not sure
At home			
At your Institution			

8. To your knowledge, to what extent are the majority of your students proficient in: (1 = very proficient, 4 = not at all proficient)

	1	2	3	4
Using a computer				
Using the Internet				
Using e-mail				

9. How do you generally teach English?

Conventional face-to-face classroom lessons only	
Online only	
Combination of both methods	
Other (specify)	

10. If you use online methods in your English teaching, do you use Internet-based activities?

Yes	
No	
Sometimes	

11. If you responded yes or sometimes to Question 10 above, which of your students' English skills have you used the Internet for?

Reading	
Writing	
Speaking	
Listening	
Vocabulary	
Grammar	
Pronunciation	
Cross-cultural communication	
Other (specify)	

12. If you have used Internet activities in your English teaching, specify the course/s and the levels at which you have done so:

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13. If you have used the Internet in your teaching, identify the activities you use/ have used with students, and the extent to which you use/ have used them:

	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
Using search engines				
Research projects				
Listserves				
Bulletin boards				
Discussion threads				
Treasure hunts				
Keypals				
E-mail dialogue journals				
Online courses (eg. Blackboard, WebCT)				
Audio streaming				
Video streaming				
Quizzes				
Designing materials				
Designing web pages				
Other (specify)				

14. To what extent do you think the use of Internet-based activities can promote learner achievement in English?

To a large extent	
To a minimal extent	
Not at all	
Not sure	

15. Other comments about the use of ICT in teaching English:

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Thank you for your time.

Sincerely, Leila Kajee  
[Leila@languages.wits.ac.za](mailto:Leila@languages.wits.ac.za)

## Appendix 2

<b>Student proficiency survey</b>
-----------------------------------

**Section One: Biographical Details** (for statistical purposes only)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address (if you have one): \_\_\_\_\_

Age (please tick):            under 20-25                      26- 30                      over 30

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Home language: \_\_\_\_\_

Degree: \_\_\_\_\_

**Section Two: English and ICT proficiency**

2.1. How would you rate your proficiency (ability) in the following English skills? Please indicate the most suitable response with a cross (X).

	More than adequate	Adequate	Less than adequate	Not adequate
Reading				
Writing				
Speaking				
Listening				

2.2 Do you have regular access to a computer?

	Yes	No
Where you live		
At your institution		

2.3 Do you have regular access to the Internet?

	Yes	No
Where you live		
At your institution		

2.4 How would you rate your proficiency (ability) to use the following:

	More than adequate	Adequate	Less than adequate	Not adequate
Computer				
E-mail				
Internet				

2.5 If you have used a computer before, how did you learn to do so?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2.6 If you have used the Internet and e-mail before, how did you learn to do so?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2.7 Complete the following statement by placing a cross (X) in the most suitable column:  
**“Using the Internet in the English classroom might help me....”**

		<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
1.	to read English better					
2	to write English better					
3	to listen better					
3	to speak better					
4	to improve my vocabulary					
5	to pronounce English words better					
6	to communicate with other cultural groups					
7	to use the English I learnt previously					
8	to understand things better					
9	to learn to use a computer better					
10	to work with my class mates					
11	to communicate with my teacher more					
12	by providing me with a challenge					
13	to learn what I did not know before					
14	to understand what I previously found difficult					
15	to communicate with my fellow learners more					
16	and other learners to help one another					
17	to be more independent					

2.8 Answer the following question and provide a reason for your choice:  
**“I would like to use the Internet more in the English classroom”:**

	<b>Please cross (X)</b>	<b>Reason</b>
Yes		
No		
Not sure		

Thank you for your time, Leila



### Appendix 3

**Questionnaire: School of Literature and  
Language Studies:  
Head of School  
Head: IT for Humanities**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. To your knowledge, does Wits have a technology plan? If so, what is its purpose?

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2. Do you see a need to incorporate technology (such as computers, Internet, e-mail) in the Humanities classroom? Why?

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3. To what extent has Wits started incorporating online learning (OLL) in the classroom in the School of Literature and Language Studies?

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4. If OLL has been implemented, how have staff members responded to the attempts?

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---

5. If OLL has been implemented, how have students responded to the attempts?

---

---

---

6. If OLL has not been implemented, what have the constraints been?

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---

---

7. If OLL has been implemented, what have the challenges been since its implementation?

---

---

---

8. What have the benefits been since implementation?

---

---

---

9. What facilities does SLLS have for students in terms of:

9.1 Computer laboratories:

9.2 Computers:

9.3 Printers:

9.4 Internet and e-mail access:

10. What facilities does SLLS have for teaching staff in terms of :

10.1 Computer laboratories:

10.2 Computers:

10.3 Printers:

10.4 Internet access:

11. Do you think the facilities and equipment are sufficient for OLL at Wits? If not, what facilities and equipment do we still require?

12. Are teaching staff trained for OLL?

13. If so, how are staff trained?

14. Are students trained to use OLL at undergraduate level? If so, how are they trained?

15. To your knowledge, how could the implementation of OLL benefit students?

16. To your knowledge, how could the implementation of OLL benefit staff?

17. Do you think OLL could impact on the teaching of English in particular? If so, how?

---

---

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18. In your capacity as Head of School/IT for the Humanities, what role do you envisage will be played by OLL in SLLS in the future?

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19. Additional comments about OLL.

---

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Thank you for your time.

Sincerely, Leila Kajee

## Appendix 4

<b>Observation schedule</b>
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Observation number: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Time: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Students observed: \_\_\_\_\_

Category	Comment
Venue (setup of room, notices, number of computers, number of computers working)	
General computer access (number of students, queues to use computers, students per computer)	
Students' ability to get connected to the Net	
Nicenet class (students' ability to get connected, ability to navigate the class, post and respond to messages)	
Other Internet searches and sites accessed	
Requests for assistance (lecturer/ technician/ friend/ peer/ other)	
Independent work	
Pair and group work	
Other comments	

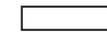
## Appendix 5

### Layout of the IT for Humanities Computer Laboratory

Front of class

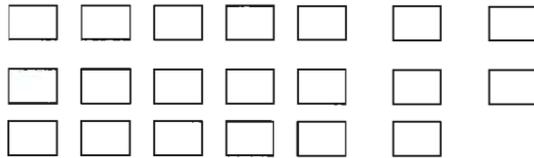


Flip chart

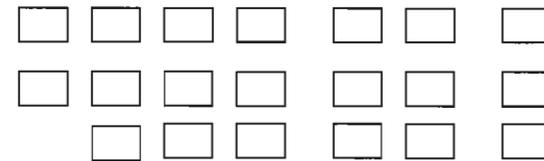


Board

20 workstations



20 workstations



Foldaway partition



Door/entrance

Technician's office with glass partition

## Appendix 6

### Student Interview Schedule

#### Section 1: Biographical details (for statistical purposes only)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Age:                    under 20            21-25            26- 30            over 30  
Gender: \_\_\_\_\_  
Year of study: \_\_\_\_\_  
Region, country of birth: \_\_\_\_\_  
Degree: \_\_\_\_\_  
Home Language: \_\_\_\_\_  
Number of years studying English:    0-5    6-10    more than 10

#### Section 2: ICT-practice, proficiency and access

2.1 Did you have access to computers and the Internet at high school?  
\_\_\_\_\_

2.2 Do you have regular access to a computer:

2.2.1 Where you live? \_\_\_\_\_

2.2.3 At your institution? \_\_\_\_\_

2.3 Do you have regular access to the Internet?

2.3.1 Where you live: \_\_\_\_\_

2.3.2 At your institution: \_\_\_\_\_

2.4 How did you learn to use the computer and Internet? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2.5 How would you estimate your proficiency in using the following before and after the project?

2.5.1 Computers: \_\_\_\_\_

2.5.2 E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

2.5.3 Internet: \_\_\_\_\_

2.6 How often do you log on to the Internet?

2.6.1 For class use? \_\_\_\_\_

2.6.2 For personal use? \_\_\_\_\_

2.7 For what purposes do you log on, and what types of sites do you generally visit?  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### Section 3: Internet-based classroom and English practices

3.1 Have you enjoyed using the online class? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

3.2 Are you using computers and the Internet in any of your other courses?  
\_\_\_\_\_

3.3 Do you think there are advantages to using computers and the Internet in class? If so, what are they?  
\_\_\_\_\_

3.4 Do you think there are disadvantages to using computers and the Internet in class? If so, what are they?

\_\_\_\_\_

3.5 Has the use of the Net helped you communicate better:

3.5.1 With your lecturer? If so, in what way? \_\_\_\_\_

3.5.2 With fellow students in class? If so, in what way? \_\_\_\_\_

3.6 Have you been using the e-pals system? If so, how many students have you been communicating with? \_\_\_\_\_

3.7 What do you generally communicate about? \_\_\_\_\_

3.8 What do you consider advantages and disadvantages of e-pal communication? \_\_\_\_\_

**Section 4: Learner Autonomy**

4.1 Do you enjoy working on your own? If so, has the online class helped you work on your own? Explain. \_\_\_\_\_

4.2 Do you enjoy learning? If so, has the online class helped you enjoy learning in any way? Explain. \_\_\_\_\_

4.3 Are you generally curious about learning? If so, has the online class helped satisfy your curiosity about learning? Explain. \_\_\_\_\_

4.4 Do you think that the teacher should always guide the learning process in the face-to-face classroom? Explain. \_\_\_\_\_

4.5 Do you need the teacher to guide you when you use the Net? \_\_\_\_\_

4.6 Do you generally develop ideas on your own? Explain. \_\_\_\_\_

4.7 When you use the Net does it help you develop ideas? Explain. \_\_\_\_\_

4.8 Do you enjoy challenges in the learning environment? Do you think the Net and online class present a challenge to you? Explain. \_\_\_\_\_

4.9 Do you generally formulate your own learning goals? \_\_\_\_\_

4.10 Are you able to find resources easily on the Net? \_\_\_\_\_

4.11 Do you generally use strategies when you learn? If so, what are they? Do you use strategies on the Net? \_\_\_\_\_

- 4.12 Are you generally able to retain what you learn?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 4.13 After using the Net are you able to retain what you have learnt? Explain.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 4.14 Do you consider yourself a critical thinker? If so, does the Net and the online class help you think critically in any way? Explain.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 4.15 Are you generally able to evaluate your own progress? If so, does the online class help in this way? Explain. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 4.16 Do you generally relate what you just learnt to what you already know? Does the online class help in this way? Explain.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 4.17 If you don't know something do you keep trying until you do? If so, has the class helped you persist? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 4.18 Do you manage your time well? Does the Net help you manage your time? Explain.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 4.19 Do you consider yourself an independent learner? Has the Net contributed to your independence in any way? Explain. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 4.20 Did you learn anything new from the OLEP? Explain. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 4.21 What do you prefer, online or face-to-face classes, or a combination of both? Why?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 4.21 Would you recommend that more online components be used in your other courses? Why or why not?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 4.22 Do you have any other comments about the online class? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you, Leila ☺

## Appendix 7

### Character sketch of the subjects

**Adam** is under 20 years old. He is from Giyani and speaks Tsonga as his home language. He is a BA student. He is independent, and prefers to work on his own, rather than in a group.

**Alex** is a 21-year old male from KwaZulu Natal. His home language is isiZulu. He is an LLB student who works very hard. He is a determined young man and generally does very well in his written work.

**Blessing**, a 20-year old male from Gauteng, was born in KwaZulu Natal, but left the province while he was still at school because of the violence in the province at the time. He is an LLB student who applies what we do in class to his other courses, and generally does quite well.

**Elsie** is a 20-25 year old female who is doing LLB. She is from the North West and is Tswana speaking. She is friendly, outgoing, and enjoys class discussions. She has many friends in class. Elsie often 'popped in' to visit or to consult in my office, sometimes bringing along friends from other classes.

**Ernest** is under 20. He is from Mpumalanga, and is Tswana speaking. Although he was interested in Law, he changed to Social Work, which he felt was his calling. He is a mature young man who conducts himself very professionally. He is also considered a role model by teachers and learners at his former high school, and is sometimes called upon to address and motivate learners.

**Farzana** is a 19-year old Iranian by birth. She arrived in South Africa to pursue her studies. Although she was born in Iran, she also spent a few years in Zambia with her family. She speaks English quite fluently, and is enthusiastic about the English class. Her home language is Persian. Conversations with her reveal that she is settling in very well and would like to pursue English as a possible career choice.

**Herman** is a first year student, aged between 20 and 25. He is originally from KwaZulu Natal, and speaks isiZulu as his home language. He has spent some time working since completing matric. He worked at odd jobs, including gardening, before getting to university. He is mature and focused and knows what he wants to do with his life. He sometimes feels that he has lost his head start, which makes him more determined to succeed. He tends to be quiet in class, but asks questions and consults when necessary.

**Leonard** is Mabela's close friend. He is under 20 years old, and is from a Sepedi background. Of the two friends, Leonard is quieter.

**Lindiwe** is an under 20 female. She is from Mpumalanga and is Tswana speaking. She is doing a BA. She is very shy, but opens up when we speak in my office. She has been in my class from the beginning of the year. She is not a very strong student, but is trying very hard, and her marks have improved during the course of the year.

**Lucky** is a very confident 20-year old male. He is a Dramatic Arts student, and always participates in class discussions. He is Tsonga speaking. He speaks confidently. His written work, which was weak at the beginning of the year, improved steadily during the course of the year. He is particularly interested in script-writing.

**Mabela** joined my class in the second semester. He is 20-25 years old, and very talkative. He often asks questions in class. He is from Pietersberg, and his home language is Sepedi. He is very good friends with Leonard, but they are sometimes disruptive in class.

**Mbali** is 21 years old. She is from Limpopo. She speaks Tswana. She is doing a BA degree and hopes to work in Psychology. She speaks her mind and is an ardent defender of women's rights. She often asks questions in class.

**Musa** is a 20-25 year old male from KwaZulu Natal. He is Tswana speaking. He is a friendly student who is doing an LLB. He joined my class in the second semester. He studied previously at Vista University.

**Natalie** is a 20-year old Portuguese speaking female. She was born in South Africa, but moved to Maputo as a child. She was taught basic English at school, but Portuguese was the medium of instruction. She had to make a difficult choice to come to South Africa to study, while her family remained in Maputo. She hopes to improve her English.

**Nothando** is an under-20 year old female who is also doing an LLB. She is from the Northern Province and is Tsonga speaking. She is an enthusiastic student, who is eager to learn more. She sometimes feels lonely being far from home.

**Oscar** is a 26-30 year old Visual Arts student from Zimbabwe. He obtained an Art qualification in Zimbabwe at what he refers to as a 'lower level', and came to South Africa to study further following political struggles in which he was involved in Zimbabwe. He has exhibited his art and is known for his rock art, which he paints onto fabric. He has also exhibited for former US President Clinton, and says he has had a piece of art on display in the White House. He also has clients in Europe. Oscar is extremely talkative in class, and always offers an opinion. He gets on very well with everyone in class, and his spoken and written English appear to be improving. At the beginning of the year he wanted to discontinue English, but said he is glad he eventually did not do so. In the first semester he would carry his *mbira* (African thumb piano) to class, which he played for us. Toward the end of the first semester he started to carry around a digital camera, and then a laptop, on which he also listened to music. He often e-mailed photographs to students in class.

**Precious** is an 18-year old female who was born in South Africa. She speaks siSwati at home. She is very hard working and tends to score good marks in all her assignments. She is quiet and serious in class.

**Sibonelo** is 20-25 years old. He is from Limpopo and speaks Sepedi at home. He says he is from a very disadvantaged background. He is an LLB student who often quotes from the South African Constitution to support his arguments.

**Xing** is a 20-25 year old male who is from Shanghai, China. He studied briefly at the University of Shanghai before coming to study B. Comm in South Africa, where he hopes to improve his English. He has been in South Africa for two years. His home language is Mandarin. He does not participate much in class, and refers to his digital dictionary when he needs to use a particular word in class.

**Zinhle** is a 20-year old male from Gauteng. He is Xhosa speaking. He joined my class in the second semester, and is very quiet in class, sometimes appearing disinterested.

## Appendix 8

<b>Course outline: Foundation in English: Academic Literacy</b>
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<b>First Quarter</b> <b>Monday 9 February - Friday March 26 2004</b>		
Week	Topic	Tutorials/tasks/activities, skills/ Readings
<b>Week 1:</b> Monday 9 February	Opening lecture:  Reflections on your learning and schooling - past, present and future	Getting to know your classmates/tutors Managing your learning and your time Organizing yourself to begin the year Reading informational documents from the university
<b>Week 2:</b> Monday 16 February	Lecture: Note taking and listening	Note taking from lectures Learning to listen Writing your autobiography Brainstorming Mind-mapping Categorizing <i>DD Thurs 19 Feb Autobiography Essay (No marks)</i>
<b>Week 3:</b> Monday 23 February	Lecture: Reading academic articles	Reading skills Note making from written texts Text organization, paragraph construction, topic sentences Comparison and contrast
<b>Week 4:</b> Monday 1 March	Lecture: Information literacy and using the library	Information literacy: library pack activities Introduction to comparative essay: analyzing the essay topic
<b>Week 5:</b> Monday 8 March	Interviews for comparative essay	Comparative Essay Categories and sub- categories. Reading : Moyo (2000)
<b>Week 6:</b> Monday 15 March	Lecture: Evidence and the construction of academic arguments  Work with <i>Agenda</i> text	Identifying the features of popular text types compared to academic texts Evidence in academic arguments Technical terms and specialist language Argument structure/s <i>DD: 11 March Comparative Essay Draft 1(20 marks)</i>
<b>Week 7:</b> (Monday 22 March – Public Holiday)	No formal lecture. Plagiarism - done in tutorials	Plagiarism Referencing conventions, Bibliographies Paraphrasing Return, feedback on Comparative essay
End of first teaching quarter: Friday March 26, 2004 Study Break: Saturday 27 March, 2004 – Tuesday 13 April, 2004		

<b>Second Quarter</b> <b>Mon 31 March – Thurs 17 April 2003</b>		
<b>Week</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Tutorials, tasks, activities, skills, readings</b>
Week 8 Wed 14 April	No formal lecture  Argument activities in tutorials	Writing introductions and conclusions More classifying, categorizing, comparing, contrasting. Assessment criteria for comparative essay <i>DD: Fri 16 April final draft of comparative essay (50 marks)</i>
Week 9 Mon 19 April	Lecture: Cohesion and coherence	Constructing cohesive and coherent arguments using logical connectors (TELIP activities)
Week 10 Mon 26 April	Lecture: Literature	Literature
Week 11 Mon 3 May	Lecture: Literature	Poetry, prose, short stories Evidence in literature  <i>DD 6 May Literature assignment (30 marks)</i>
Week 12 Mon 10 May	Preparation for oral/ poster presentations  (in tutorials- no formal lecture)	Continue argument skills  Oral presentations
Week 13 Mon 17 May	Peer evaluation of argument essay drafts Writing centre support ( no formal lecture)	Writing an argumentative essay, drafting, redrafting Use as a basis for oral/poster presentation Self and peer editing of argumentative essay Oral presentations <i>DD: 20 May Argument essay (40 marks)</i>
Week 14 Mon 24 May	Exam preparation	Oral presentations (30 marks) Return and feedback on argument essay
Week 15 Mon 31 May	EXAMS start 31 May- 25 June	
Winter vacation/study break Sat 26 June- Sun 18 July		

## Appendix 9

<b>Course outline: Foundation in English: Language and Research</b>
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<b>First Quarter 19 July – 4 September 2004</b>		
<b>Week</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Tutorials/ Tasks/ Activities/ Skills/ Readings</b>
<u>Week 1</u> 19 July	Review of Term 1 Examination  General Lecture	Class reading + Assignment 1 McCormick, K. (1986) <i>Children's use of language in District Six</i> . <u>Burman and Reynolds</u>  Class reading: Statutes of the Republic of South Africa – Constitutional Law – Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act No 108 of 1996.
<u>Week 2</u> 26 July	Introduction to key concepts: Language policies and practices in South Africa Language Variety  General Lecture	Class reading: Trew, R. (1994) <i>Language in South Africa – the implications of the new Constitution for Afrikaans and the African languages</i> . <u>Bulletin: The South African Translators Institute</u> No 6 1994  Continue reading McCormick
<u>Week 3</u> 2 August	Code mixing and code switching  General Lecture	Class reading: Slabbert, S. (1994) <i>IsiSoweto: Ek slaan al die tale</i> . <u>Bua!</u> 9:1 1 April 1994  Reading Assignment 2: Reichman, M (1993) <i>Who is the witness?</i> <u>Language Projects Review</u> 8:1 April 1993
<u>Week 4</u> 9 August	Naming Practices	Class Reading: Orlek, J. (1993) <i>Languages in South Africa</i>  Reading Assignment 3: Gaganakis, M. (1992) <i>Language and Ethnic group relations in non-racial schools</i> <u>The English Academy Review</u>
<u>Week 5</u> 16 August	Generating Research Questions	Selecting research topics and organizing project groups Writing a group contract Reading Assignment 4: Molamu, L (1995) <i>Wietie: The emergence of Tsotsitaal in South Africa</i> <u>Alternation</u> 2:2, 1995
<u>Week 6</u> 23 August	Literacy practices  General Lecture	Research questions and data collecting procedures  Class reading: Breier, M et al (1996) <i>Taking Literacy for a ride – reading and writing in the taxi industry</i> In Prinsloo, M and Breier, M (eds) <u>The Social uses of Literacy</u> . SACHED Books

<u>Week 7</u> 30 August	Qualitative and quantitative data  General Lecture	Completing questionnaires and interview schedules  Data gathering, collating and interpreting
Study break: 5 September – 12 September		
<b>Second Quarter</b> <b>13 September – 26 October 2004</b>		
<b>Week</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Tutorials/ Tasks/ Activities/ Skills/ Readings</b>
<u>Week 8</u> 13 September	Presenting quantitative data  Tutorial groups	Graphic representation eg pie charts, graphs, tables  Class reading: Bell, F. <i>At the works</i> . In Keating, P. (1976) <u>Into Unknown England</u>  <b>NB: By the end of this week all data must be collected</b>
<u>Week 9</u> 20 September	Working with qualitative data  Tutorial groups	Interviews (structured and unstructured), transcripts, stories, diaries, photographs, etc. Looking for themes, patterns and counter-patterns in data.
<u>Week 10</u> 20 September	Working with qualitative data  Tutorial groups	Analysis and interpretation of data
<u>Week 11</u> 4 October	Oral presentation  Tutorial groups	Data analysis and interpretation Planning oral presentations
<u>Week 12</u> 11 October	Writing the research report  Tutorial groups	Planning oral presentations  Bell, J. (1993) Writing the research report p 164
<u>Week 13</u> 18 October	Oral presentations  Tutorial groups	Oral presentations
<u>Week 14</u> 25 October	Oral presentations	Drafting and writing the research report Revision for examinations
Examinations Semester ends Tuesday, 26 October 2004		

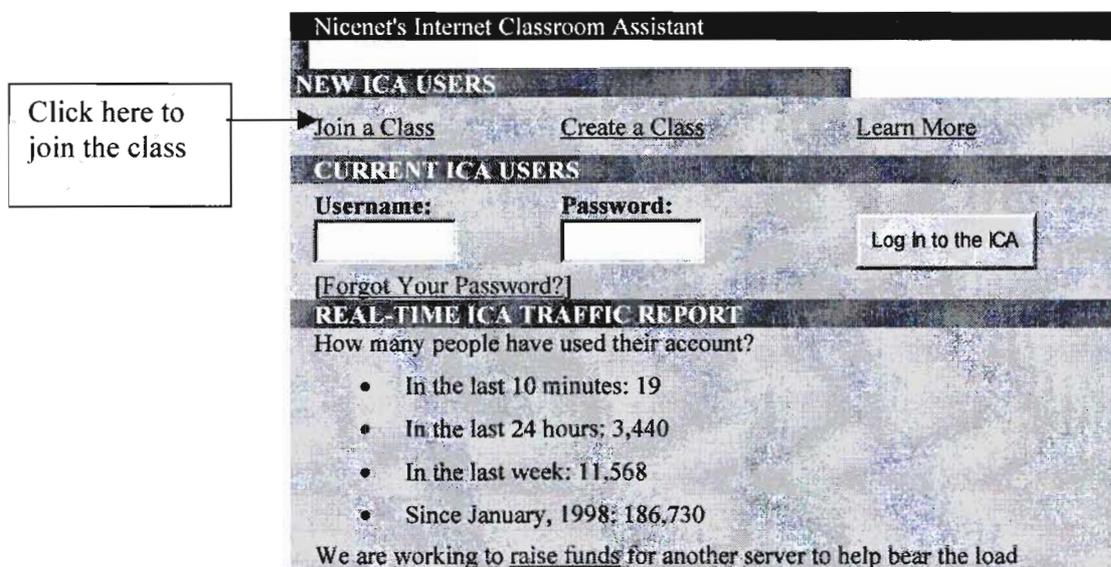
## Appendix 10<sup>195</sup>

### Joining the Nicenet class for the first time

So, you are ready to try something new. Follow these instructions carefully to join our online class, and see me if you have problems.

1. First, make sure that you have a CNS password to access the Internet, or you won't be able to log on to the system.
2. Double click (left key on mouse) on the **Internet Explorer** icon on your screen to access the Internet.
3. In the "address" line, which is the white box towards the top left corner of the page, type in the address : <http://www.nicenet.org> and press enter (on keyboard). Be careful that the address you typed is correct. The *Nicenet Internet classroom assistant* page will be displayed. See Figure 1.

Figure 1 This is what the first page looks like when you log in to <http://www.nicenet.org/>



4. Using your mouse, place your cursor over "Join a Class" and click (left key on mouse). You will then be requested to enter the class key.
5. Click in the white box next to Class key and enter the following class code: (code given to students) and click on "Join the Class". **You must remember this key, so write it down somewhere safe.**

**NB :** If you have already joined the class in a previous session , then proceed to "Joining the class as a current user"

6. Complete the online registration form for the class:
  - enter a "**Username**" : any length but not a name that you think more than two people have. Remember to make a note of the name you use as you will need this whenever you log on!

<sup>195</sup> This handout was originally designed by Delysia Timm (DIT) in 2002, and adapted by Leila Kajee for use in her project in 2003.

- Enter a **“Password”** : Not more than 6 characters (preferably something you will not forget easily. Remember this password too!
  - Enter an **“email address”** : complete address eg [Leila@languages.wits.ac.za](mailto:Leila@languages.wits.ac.za) If you don't have an e-mail address yet, try to get one through hotmail ([www.hotmail.com](http://www.hotmail.com)) or yahoo ([www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com)) . This is free and you only have to follow the instructions. If you have problems creating one, you may see me for help.
  - Enter the **“email address”** again to confirm .
  - Enter **“first name”** then **“last name”** (surname). These details will appear at the top of the home page once in the class.
  - Click **“Join the class”**
7. Your username will appear on a new page with “save this information now” on the page -- you can record the URL (http address). Page Down or Scroll down the page to find **“Finish Registration”**. Click on “finish registration” to complete your registration.
  8. On the new page, enter your **“username”** and **“password”** as you did on the registration form and press **“log in to the ICA”**.
  9. You are now in the “home” page of the class. See Fig 2 for an example of a home page. Remember that each Nicenet class has basically the same format, but the actual documents and messages that are loaded will differ.

#### **Joining the class as a current user**

1. Open “internet explorer” and type the following address: <http://www.nicenet.org>
2. Type in your “username and “password” in the spaces provided and press “log in”. See Figure 1.
3. Enter the class key: (code given to students), as requested.
4. Follow through the various sections.

**Figure 2**

Below is a copy of the “home “ page of a class. Follow the instructions in the grey blocks:

**Your name will go here**

Leila Kajee

**Classroom Internet Assistant**

Friday, March 26, 2004 6:27AM CST

Foundation 124

[Home – Foundation 124/126](#)

**Since you last logged in on Friday, March 02 :**

5. No new personal messages have been sent  
[[View Messages](#) | [Send a Message](#)]

**Conferencing**

19. No new comments have been posted under any topics.  
[[View Topics](#) | [New Topic](#) | [New Message](#)]

**Link Sharing**

- No new links have been posted.  
[[View Links](#) | [New Link](#)]

**WEEK AT A GLANCE**  
[[View Schedule](#) |

**Click here to send a message to anyone in the class**

**Click here to view any readings and summaries**

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Remember the class is created for your convenience, and to promote more discussion. It is another way of accessing notes, asking questions communicating with your classmates and lecturer. Play around with it, get used to it and you'll experience the difference! Good luck, and see me if you'd like to know more.