



Research Article

'Your voice counts': Understanding how online student evaluations encourage lecturers' pedagogies during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Received 8 September 2022; Revised 12 December 2022; Accepted 20 December 2022

Student evaluations are used frequently within higher education institutions, as lecturers are expected to respond to these in a way that improves course delivery and addresses students' concerns. The purpose of this article was to understand how online student evaluations encourage lecturers' pedagogies in a comprehensive open distance and e-Learning university in South Africa. This article argues that student pre-evaluation questions, which are posted on the learning management system at the beginning of a course, may reduce the transactional distance in a module, if implemented correctly. This qualitative study makes use of documentary analysis, email interviews, and an observation schedule to (1) understand the pedagogical shifts first year students require in student evaluations, (2) explore if student evaluations encourage lecturers to alter their pedagogies and, (3) to investigate the impact of student evaluations on lecturer pedagogies. Moore's theory of transactional distance was used to analyse the findings in this study. The findings revealed that students are very vocal in online student evaluations as they are aware of their pedagogical needs in a module and lecturers were encouraged and influenced by the student evaluations. The results may inform teaching and policy decisions as more institutions transition to online course evaluation collection methods, particularly given the restrictions imposed by the current COVID-19 crisis. Suggestions for future research include examining the usability of student evaluation comments as well as trends in student feedback quality following the transition to emergency remote teaching during the global pandemic.

Keywords: Student evaluations, online learning, distance learning, quality assurance

1. Introduction

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic forced many higher education institutions (HEIs) to adopt online methods of teaching and learning (Garris & Fleck, 2022). While the pandemic may have imposed pedagogical shifts, the onus remains within departments and modules, specifically, to determine the extent of these shifts to ensure overall quality assurance. Many HEIs throughout the world have been working towards a culture of quality, with an emphasis on encouraging excellent teaching and learning using various instruments to improve pedagogical support. An informational tool that has gained popularity in HEIs to support good teaching and learning is student evaluations (Garris & Fleck, 2022; Plante et al., 2021; Serin, 2019). Student evaluations were originally created to evaluate courses, programmes and evaluate teaching effectiveness. Researchers refer to student evaluations in many ways; some refer to them as course evaluations, student evaluations of teaching, end-of-course evaluations, and end-of-course critiques (Plante et al., 2021). The researcher uses the term 'student evaluations' to describe the process of garnering online student feedback at the beginning of the module (pre-evaluation). This article seeks to understand how the pre-evaluation questions posted at the beginning of the semester in a module impacts on lecturers' pedagogical shifts in an open distance and e-Learning (ODEL) university in South Africa. Although various processes inform lecturers' pedagogies in HEIs, student feedback is one of the most valuable contributions (Garris & Fleck, 2022; Plante et al., 2021). This research may be deemed significant as student evaluations may provide useful information for lecturers in

HEIs; such as the need to adopt and adapt teaching pedagogies and resources and to guide important decisions that occur within a module. The research questions that inform this article is:

RQ1: What pedagogical shifts do students require in the evaluations to make their learning easier?

RQ2: How do student evaluations encourage lecturers to alter their pedagogies?

RQ3: Do student evaluations impact on lecturers' pedagogies?

Prior to the pandemic, many HEIs have used student evaluations in their courses; however, for HEIs which have moved from face-to-face to online teaching, and during the post COVID-19 pandemic, the role of student evaluations have become critical to address issues that arise during the sudden remote teaching and learning. Student evaluations are the main tool used to measure the pedagogical abilities of lecturers and understand students' needs in HEIs (Jones et al., 2022; Serin, 2019). The information obtained from student evaluations is crucial for institutional decision-making and accountability procedures in HEIs (Langan & Harris, 2019). These changes have the potential to change how students are viewed within systems and procedures as well as how much agency they are given (Dusi & Huisman, 2020). This article focuses on understanding students' needs in their evaluations and how those needs encourage lecturers to tailor their pedagogies. Interesting, there is extremely limited research on student evaluations in South Africa and it is hoped that this article will expand on the limited research on student evaluations that is available. While a substantial body of research indicates that student evaluations have a favourable impact on pedagogy (Naomi et al., 2022; Serin, 2019), some studies indicate that these evaluations could not have enough of an impact. Advocating for that latter, scholars have argued that student evaluations are perceived to be biased (Carpenter et al., 2020), and claims that students can be influenced by incentives which may positively affect how they respond (Youmans & Lee, 2007). A further problem associated with student evaluations is that student evaluations are not a good indication of student learning (Jones et al., 2022). However, Jones et al. (2022) argue that student evaluations may provide a good indication of the motivational climate that is created by a lecturer in a module. Research indicates that students in HEIs preferred to complete online student evaluations and not written ones as they provided more anonymity, it gives students more time to process their thinking, students were able to provide more comments and detail, and it was more flexible, easy, and convenient to complete (Plante et al., 2021; Raman & Nedungadi, 2020).

Although there are scholars who argue that students are not qualified enough to provide feedback on their lecturers' pedagogies (Simpson & Sigauw, 2000; Youmans & Lee, 2007), it is argued that students are the best quality assurers of their lecturers' pedagogies as they attend their lecturers' lectures, observe their effectiveness, and engage with their resources. Students are the best judges of their own learning and for this reason, student evaluations have become an integral part of ensuring quality assurance in pedagogy. In a study conducted by Serin (2019) in a university with first-year students in Iraq, students noted that the use of student feedback enhanced quality teaching and learning. According to Serin (2019, p. 170):

The students in the post-survey questionnaire reported agreement that student course evaluations at the university helped instructors improve their teaching. The difference between pre and post survey questionnaires indicate that the feedback instructors received from the students motivated them to perform better teaching because it is evident that they utilized the data for developmental purposes.

In a study conducted in Norwegian University by Borch et al. (2020), students were excited to share their perceptions of how they believed their course could be altered to accommodate their learning needs. In this study, students considered themselves experts on their own learning processes using student evaluations. In addition, lecturers were interviewed, and it was revealed that student evaluations increased their awareness of student learning processes and used students' perceptions to inform their teaching (Borch et al., 2020). Similarly, Maiyo (2018) in Nigeria noted that the feedback on student evaluations helped university lecturers to improve their teaching and interaction. In Maiyo's (2018) study, it was further revealed that most lecturers (57.14 per cent of 70 respondents) alleged that they never met to discuss student evaluations.

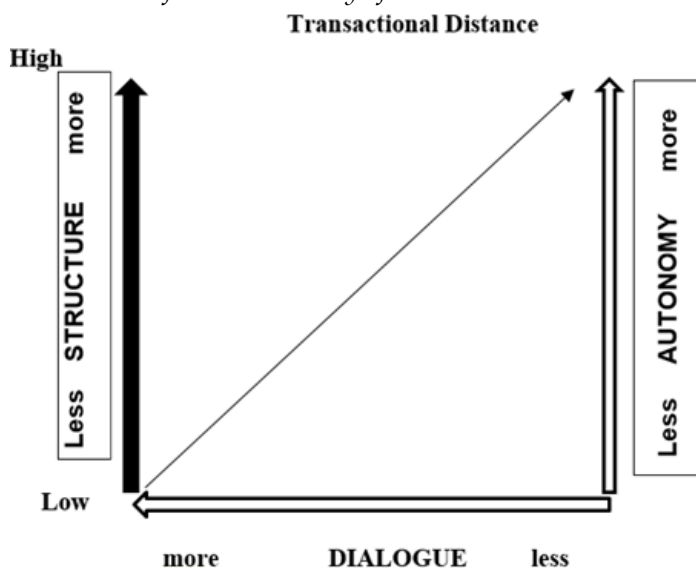
Student learning is affected by lecturer care and engagement. According to Bell (2022), lecturers who engage positively and proactively with students create a sense of belonging in a course; this is referred to as 'relational pedagogy'. Additionally, the study offers no explanation why some instructors lack relational pedagogical expertise. Poor training, personality, or sporadic insensitive behaviour brought on by the strain of work overload or job instability could be some of the causes. It would be interesting to observe how lecturers in the module under study utilise relational pedagogy. The transactional distance gap between lecturers and students in a module would widen if relational pedagogy were absent.

Moore's theory of transactional distance was employed in this article. This theory was adopted to facilitate a more systematic exploration of lecturers' experiences of student evaluations and students' experiences of pedagogical needs. The psychological and geographical gap between the lecturer and the students is a topic of this theory, which has its roots in the 1970s. More intricate and diverse features were added to the theory by Zhang (2003). The physical, cognitive, social, psychological, and behavioural distance between lecturers and pupils is what Zhang (2003) meant when the term "transactional distance" was coined. To investigate interaction in online educational environments, the global idea of transactional distance has been widely embraced in the field of online education research. Moore (1993) recommended that those involved in distance education consider the three factors of structure, discourse, and autonomy because they have an impact on transactional distance (Lowe, 2000; Swart & Macleod, 2021).

Structure relates to how tools, methods, and instructional design are organized by lecturers for their classes, while conversation refers to how lecturers and students interact over the course of distance learning. The level and type of student accountability and self-direction are referred to as autonomy. Figure 1 shows that the transactional distance between a lecturer and students increases as a lecturer exhibits more structure and less discussion, while the student's responsibility also increases.

Figure 1

Illustration of Moore's theory of transactional distance



The main idea of transactional distance is dialogue, which has been enlarged to encompass four categories: lecturer-student, student-student, student-content, and vicarious interaction, which students witness between others (Lowe, 2000; Swart & Macleod, 2021; Zhang, 2003). According to Moore (1993), a module with an elevated level of structure will not be as sensitive to the needs and preferences of the student, increasing transactional distance. However, other researchers have discovered that high structure might promote student dialogue and, hence, reduce transactional distance (Huang et al., 2016). Through a theoretical grounding of the transactional distance theory,

the purpose of this article is to understand how online student evaluations encourages lecturers' pedagogies in a comprehensive ODeL university in South Africa.

2. Method

2.1. The Research Context

This article's contextual setting is an ODeL university in South Africa where an online form of delivery is the norm. With more than 400,000 registered students from over 136 countries, the institution is one of the largest distance learning universities in Africa. This article's disciplinary setting is a first-year undergraduate English Academic Writing module, which is a requirement for the Bachelor of Arts degree. The pseudonym ENG321 is given to the module to protect the identities of the students, lecturers, and the university. The ENG321 module comprise approximately 16,000 registered students per semester. The module is for first-year students who speak English as a native language. However, most of the students registered for the module speak English as an additional language. Moodle has been implemented at the university under study since January 2022. Prior to 2022, the learning management system (LMS) was Sakai. The ENG321 module is considered a high-risk module as the pass rate of the module has not exceeded 75 per cent over the past five years. This study attempted to use student evaluations to understand how students' needs encourage lecturers' pedagogical practices. It is hoped that the student evaluations assist lecturers to increase the pass rate in the forthcoming years. Data for this study was gathered over semester 1 of 2022. The module comprises ten lectures who teach the module, the researcher being one of the lecturers.

2.2 Research Method and Design

The study's focus was consistent with a qualitative phenomenological technique as it allowed the researcher to access the experiences of students and lecturers to understand how student evaluations would have encouraged lecturers' pedagogies. This exploratory study acquired background data, including observations and material from the literature, which helped establish quality assurance issues and was utilized to support the findings from lecturers and study participants. Furthermore, rather than offering representative data, the findings produce data that deepens the understanding of the phenomenon of student evaluations.

2.3 Research Participants and Sampling

This study was granted ethical clearance and both students and lecturers were informed that they could participate and/or withdraw from the study at any point. Pseudonyms were provided to protect the identities of the lecturers and institutions (Holloway & Galvin, 2016). Students were sampled randomly, and, in the study, they are given pseudonyms. Similarly, lecturers were purposively sampled and are referred to as Lecturer 1, Lecturer 2, and Lecturer 3 and so on. As this is a qualitative study, ten students and all ten lecturers in the module team were included as participants in the study. However, only six of the ten lecturers responded to the email interview question. This number is justified as qualitative studies aim to deal with small number of participants to gather thick descriptions from them. The data that was received from the lecturers was sufficient to answer the research question.

2.4 Research Instruments

Data were gathered qualitatively through student evaluation responses, email interviews with lecturers and an observation of the Moodle LMS (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Lecturers sent regular announcements to encourage students to answer the student evaluations. To address the first research question, pre-evaluation questions were posted on the Moodle LMS for students to answer. The one question that will be analysed is presented in Table 1. To answer the second research question, email interview questions sent to lecturers to corroborate the first research question. The question that will be discussed in this article is presented in Table 1. To answer the

third research question, an observation schedule was used to corroborate the findings in the first and second research questions.

Table 1

Questions directed to the participants

Pre-evaluation question

What pedagogical shifts do students request in the student evaluations to make their learning easier?

Email interview question

What changes have you made in your pedagogy to make students' learning easier?

Observation schedule

What pedagogical changes have been observed on the Moodle site to make students' learning easier?

2.5 Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection and discussion method employed was the phenomenological approach (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Data were obtained at the end of the first semester of 2022. In April 2022, qualitative pre-evaluation questions were posted on the Moodle LMS to assess the students' pedagogical needs in the ENG321 module. During the first two weeks of July 2022, email interviews (Cresswell & Poth, 2018) were conducted with lecturers during the end of the semester. In August 2022, an observation of the Moodle site was done to corroborate the findings from the documentary analysis and the email interviews. While the data was being studied, thematic analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018) was used where the researcher developed themes which were linked to the research questions.

3. Findings

The major findings were categorized into themes and are presented in this section. This section reports on the findings from students, lecturers, and observations of the Moodle LMS to understand how lecturers' use the student evaluations to encourage their pedagogies. Three research instruments were triangulated to ensure validity and credibility of the findings and the following three themes emerged:

- Pedagogical shifts required by students to make learning easy
- Do student evaluations encourage lecturers to alter their pedagogies?
- Observations of new pedagogies on the Moodle learning management system

3.1 Pedagogical Shifts Required by Students to Make Learning Easy

The first research question seeks to understand the pedagogical shifts required by students to make their learning in the ENG321 module easier. To answer this research question, the researcher analysed ten randomly sampled student evaluations out of 1900 responses that were posted on the ENG321 2022 semester one Moodle site. In the randomly sampled pre-evaluations, all the students shared what they would like lecturers to do in the module. Students were honest in their responses. For example, Mila mentioned:

I am very visual and auditory person. I would like it if the site were more accessible for first year students. Please post videos and podcasts for us. And please do more live sessions and detailed examples too. Please meet with us every week. I am so scared to fail this module.

Like Mila's response above, most of the ten students' responses request for audio and visual resources. Many students like Mila start the module with preconceived ideas that they would 'fail the module' - hence, her perception that students require more support in the form of supplemental learning tools such as podcasts, vodcasts, live sessions, meetings, and extra activities. It seems as if students wanted more than one method to learn content in the module. The

ENG321 module has a reputation for being a difficult module due to the high failure rate. Shane is one such student who has failed the ENG321 many times. He noted:

This is my fifth time repeating this module. Can you please make it more accessible and be more present. Videos and podcasts will help. This is the hardest module I have ever done, and it is the only module I have left to complete my degree.

One closer inspection of Shane's response, he feels that the ENG321 is not accessible, due to its lack of resources, and that lecturers are not present, possible due to a lack of communication. It is possible that Shane feels that these are the reasons why he has failed the module many times.

Students also wanted lecturers to be more communicative, open, and welcoming. Kyla mentioned "All I would like is for the lecturers to be there for us and be welcoming and answer us when we need help. The lecturers in our other modules ignore us. Communication is key." From this response, it seems as if students have preconceived ideas about communication when starting a new module. Students are scared that there would be a lack of communication as they start to compare the start of a new module to other modules where there has been little to no communication. From Kyla's response, students place high value on communication with their lecturers.

Like Kyla's response on communication, Dani noted that he would like it if his lecturers were more patient and understanding. He expressed, "From the lecturer I expect patience and teach me every knowledge that he/she think I will need to pass this module." It must be noted that all students come to university with diverse learning needs and challenges. When students enrol in a module with thousands of students and a few lecturers, students become apprehensive as they feel their needs will not be met.

There were also requests, from three participants (Esme, Liam, and Olivia), for creating social media groups to make communication more accessible. For example, Olivia pleaded:

Please create a WhatsApp or Telegram group to support us whenever we need help and record the meetings so we can catch up if we are not available. I prefer learning through videos as I do not have time to go through all the notes. I sometimes cannot make it to the live sessions because of my busy job. The videos would enable me to watch them at my own pace. Maybe create a group so that we can be in touch with other students.

This response indicated that before the start of a module, students are already aware that they will need extra support. Three out of ten students requested that a social media group be created so that they can get support from their peers and lecturers immediately. When students post questions on the LMS, their queries are not immediately attended to. However, this may be different with a social media group as students spend a lot of time on their phones and their queries may be attended to faster than on the LMS.

The students seemed scared and desperate in their pre-evaluation responses. There were requests for more activities and practice assessments. Khwezi asked, "Can you please create flowcharts and mind maps for us? It will help us connect the dots to make everything make sense." Another participant, Rani, similarly noted, "Maybe if we can get more online activities and practice examples of our examination and assignment questions. I expect more engagement and videos from the lecturers." These responses reveal that students require extra pedagogical support from their lecturers.

3.2 Do Student Evaluations Encourage Lecturers to Alter Their Pedagogies?

The second research question sought to investigate if lecturers were persuaded by student evaluations to alter their pedagogies. Four of the six lecturers mentioned that the student evaluations motivated them to improve on their pedagogical practices. Lecturer 1 noted that she was encouraged by the pre-evaluation questions to alter her pedagogy:

We said to the students 'your voice counts'...this prompted them to be incredibly open with us in their evaluation responses. This is the first time we have taught as much as we have, compared to previous years. The pre-evaluations persuaded me to make the site as accessible and as fun as possible by incorporating whatever they wanted: more colour, visuals, podcasts, live sessions,

videos. I tried to include a lot of pictures, memes, and casual language in my teaching. In addition, I created a Telegram group to be more socially present for our students. The pre-evaluations assisted me in altering my pedagogy as students know what works for them best.

Lecturer 1 noted that she responded to the evaluation questions and has included memes, colour, pictures, videos, podcasts, and casual language into the module so that the module could be more relatable to students. According to her, this is the first time they have taught as much as they have as she has been encouraged by the students' voices in the evaluation questions. She said that she created a Telegram group to facilitate a more social module. It seems as if lecturer 1 included students as co-creators of knowledge into the module by listening to their voices in the pre-evaluation questions.

Lecturer 2 similarly responded by saying that most of the students in their pre-evaluation responses requested podcasts and vodcasts. Lecturer 2 noted:

I have seen the need for audio and visual resources, and I have incorporated the use of multimedia files such as podcasts and vodcasts because subject content is simplified and short. In addition, it caters for students' various learning styles. Lastly, it is important to explicitly explain concepts that are challenging to students and assess students on exactly what they have learned. Teaching and learning should be made fun and exciting by incorporating technology into it.

It is interesting that many students requested podcasts and vodcasts – this seems as if students require extra support to simplify their learning content. Students require more than one method to learn content. As lecturer 2 noted, this is due to their diverse learning styles and needs. Most students in 2022 are digital natives and this could be another reason they respond to audio and visual resources, which they can download and play anytime on their personal devices. Lecturer 1 and 2 have similarly noted that they have responded to students' needs for supplemental learning tools.

From the email interviews, another lecturer mentioned that she participated in the ENG321 Telegram group which students requested. Lecturer 3 noted that she used this information to create a Telegram group for her students in another module:

I participated in the Telegram group so that students could communicate with us without any hurdle. I ended up creating a Telegram group for another module I am teaching. I noticed that students get excited when we speak to them on social media as opposed to the LMS. More than anything, I improved my online presence so that students feel cared for and academically supported. In short, student evaluations helped.

Lecturer 3 supported lecturer 1 in participating on Telegram group as she sees that students require an online presence in a module. It is also interesting that she mentioned that students need to feel cared for by lecturers as students like Kyla, Dani and Olivia mentioned this in their pre-evaluation responses. It may be argued that lecturers also exhibit an emotional presence on social media platforms just by being present and available to support and respond to students. Lecturer 3 mentioned that she was inspired by the ENG321 Telegram group and went on to create a Telegram group in another module. This indicates that the students' voices do count as their voices in one module positively impacted on the pedagogy of another module.

Lecturer 4 similarly mentioned that the student evaluations in the ENG321 module motivated him to implement new pedagogical strategies into his other modules.

Thank you [the researcher] for showing us what the future of an LMS could like just by listening to the voices of our students. I really like what you have done with the site, and I have incorporated many of the strategies like podcasts, vodcasts, memes and COLOUR into the teaching of my other modules. The students also are satisfied with our approach when I looked at the post-semester evaluations. The student evaluations motivated us to get onto the students' level of understanding.

From the response above, it is clear that lecturers are influenced by students' voices from the evaluation questions. Lecturer 4, like lecturer 3, implemented strategies into his other modules as he could observe that students responded well to the new strategies in ENG321. This suggests that lecturers need to "get onto the students' level of understanding" if they want to connect with their students. It is also clear that students' voices can only be heard if a lecturer responds to the voices.

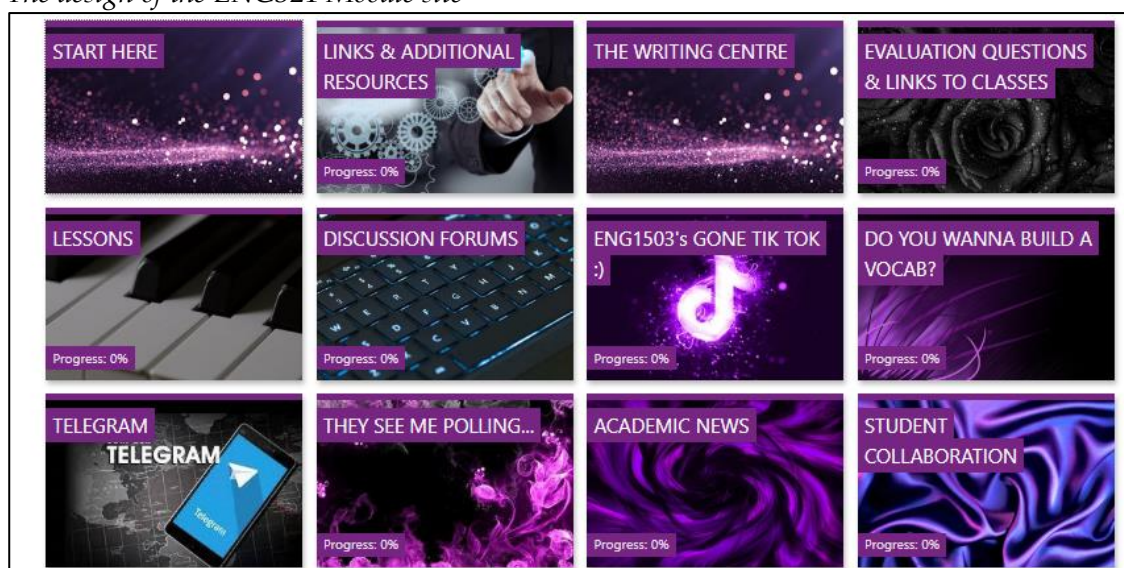
Two lecturers have admitted to not seeing the evaluation responses. Lecturer 5 noted that he has not viewed the responses to the student evaluations by indicating that “I have not seen the evaluations”. Lecturer 5 did not provide a reason for not viewing or responding to the students’ voices. In the same vein, lecturer 6 alleged that she did not have time to view the student evaluations or support students due to her heavy workload. She responded, “To be honest, I have not seen the student evaluations. My workload has been so hectic that I did not have time to support our students or respond to their needs this semester.” Lecturer 5 and lecturer 6 were not active in responding to the students’ responses and this may point towards several reasons such as a heavy lecturer workload, lack of time, lack of interest in student support, lack of relational pedagogy and, being technologically and pedagogically deficit.

3.3 Observations of New Pedagogies on the Moodle Learning Management System

The third research question sought to corroborate findings from the first two research questions. The researcher observed the Moodle LMS to check if lecturers have implemented new pedagogies because of students’ voices in the pre-evaluation responses. The students have been vocal about the pedagogies they wanted lecturers to implement to make their learning easier. Students have requested for a more accessible and visually appealing site. On opening the ENG321 site, it was observed that the students are presented with a visually stimulating welcome message, a video which includes all the lecturers (with their faces) speaking to students, memes, casual language, and lots of visually stimulating and funny pictures which related to the text. On scrolling further down the welcome message, students are greeted by a visually stimulating set of tiles which is the core of the Moodle site. Figure 2 shows the aesthetically pleasing site which illustrates the various sections of the site.

Figure 2

The design of the ENG321 Moodle site













When students click on any of the tiles, they are then navigated into the tile and to their ENG321 content. The tile ‘start here’ offers students direction on where to start and where to go next. Given that this course was held during the pandemic and students and lecturers’ emotions were running high, lecturers created a section called ‘ENG321’s gone TikTok’. In this section, there are over thirty short (30 seconds) motivational videos to encourage students during the semester. Students have requested a space where they could discuss issues with their lecturers and each other, for this reason, the discussion forum was created. Students requested extra activities to help them with the course content and the ‘lessons’ section exposed students to about twenty short lessons which were very creatively designed with memes and pictures. The ‘student collaboration’

section encouraged students to answer academic essay questions and then comment on each others' essays which sought to be more of peer assessment. Students got a chance to work with their peers in this section. There were requests for a Whatsapp or Telegram group and a Telegram group was created as the group could contain more students than a Whatsapp group could. There is section on site called 'Telegram' where students could access the link to the group and join thousands of other students in their module. The lecturers continually tried to understand students' strengths and weaknesses in the modules through 'evaluation questions' and 'polling' and this can be seen in Figure 2. Many resources and weblinks to important resources and sites were posted under 'links & additional resources.'

Many students requested podcasts and videos which break down their content to make learning easier. The lecturers have created a series of ten workshops which address various sections of academic writing. Figure 3 is an illustration of the content under 'The writing centre'. Figure 3 shows different lecturers responsible for podcasts and vodcasts (videos) for the same topic. Lecturers' names were blocked out to protect their identities. According to lecturer 2, podcasts and vodcasts "cater for students' various learning styles".

Figure 3

The implementation of podcasts and vodcasts in the module

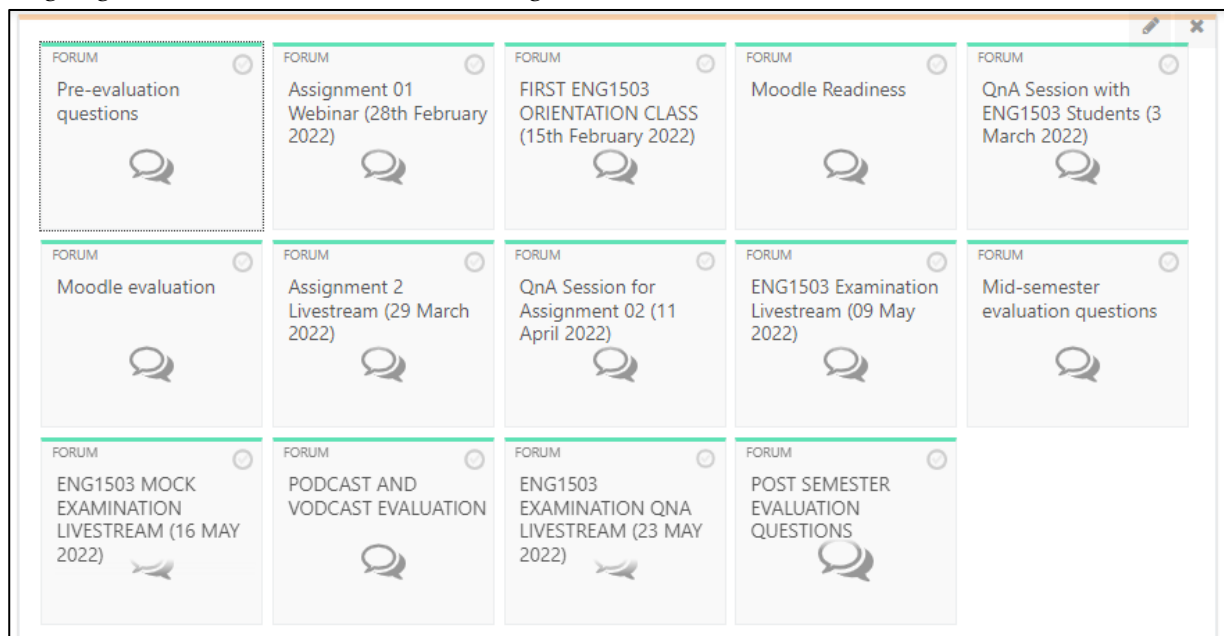
Workshop	Content	Podcasts (Audio)	Vodcasts (Video and audio)
1	An introduction to academic writing	 Ms [redacted]	 Dr [redacted]
2	How to write a paragraph	 Mr [redacted]	 Ms [redacted]
3	How to read and answer short paragraph questions for understanding	https://anchor.fm/verbra-frances-pfeiffer/episodes/Writing-short-paragraphs-e1ec4uk  Dr [redacted]	 Mr [redacted]
4	Editing and proofreading	 Dr [redacted]	 Mr [redacted]
5	How to cite and reference sources	 [redacted]	 [redacted]

Under the 'Evaluation questions & links to classes' section, students were greeted with three different evaluations (pre, mid and post) which were posted during various parts of the semester (See Figure 4). Since the module consisted of 16,000 students, the response rate was remarkably high on each of these evaluations. This article only focuses on the pre-evaluation questions. Students have also expressed that they are working and they may not be able to attend live classes. Recordings to each of the classes that were held with evaluation questions of those classes were created as shown in Figure 4. In previous years, the ENG321 module hosted 3 livestreams before

an assessment was due. Due to students requesting more live sessions in the student pre-evaluations, the lecturers held question and answer (QnA) livestreams in addition to the usual livestreams and allowed students to control those sessions by allowing them to ask questions for the entire duration of each of the livestreams. This was very well received by students, according to the evaluation responses for each livestream.

Figure 4

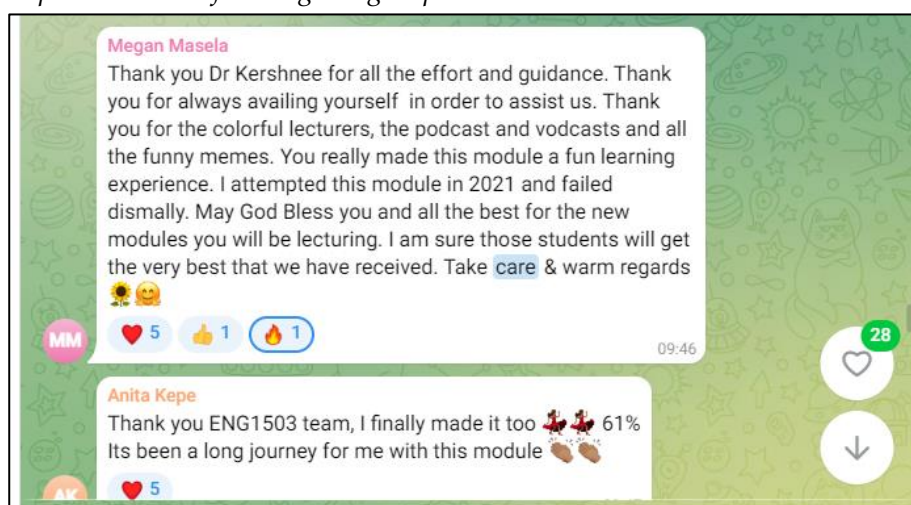
Ongoing evaluations and live sessions throughout the semester



Another pedagogy which students requested were social media groups. On clicking the link on the LMS to the Telegram group, the researcher was taken directly to the 2022 ENG321 lecturer-student support group and observed that students seemed very satisfied with the way in which the group was managed throughout the semester. More than anything, students wanted open and fast communication and they wanted to feel welcomed and appreciated in the module. Figure 5 illustrates a screenshot of the Telegram group towards the end of the first semester of 2022.

Figure 5

Implementation of a Telegram group



From Figure 5, it can be deduced that students were satisfied with the lecturers' implementation of pedagogical strategies which they have requested through the pre-evaluation responses. It was observed that lecturers provided more than what the students have asked for. Above providing pedagogical assistance to students, lecturers have provided a lot of emotional support through various strategies such as the inclusion of TikTok motivational videos, being emotionally present on Telegram, the inclusion of various collaborative peer activities on Moodle and various support livestreams where students were given the opportunity to drive the lessons. Students have noticed the 'effort and guidance' put into the module from their lecturers and they were thankful at the end of the module. The creation of the ENG321 Telegram group was regarded as a 'fun learning experience' as they felt welcomed, included, and heard in the module.

4. Discussion

This section of the article comprises a discussion of how students' voices on pedagogy encouraged lecturers to improve their pedagogies.

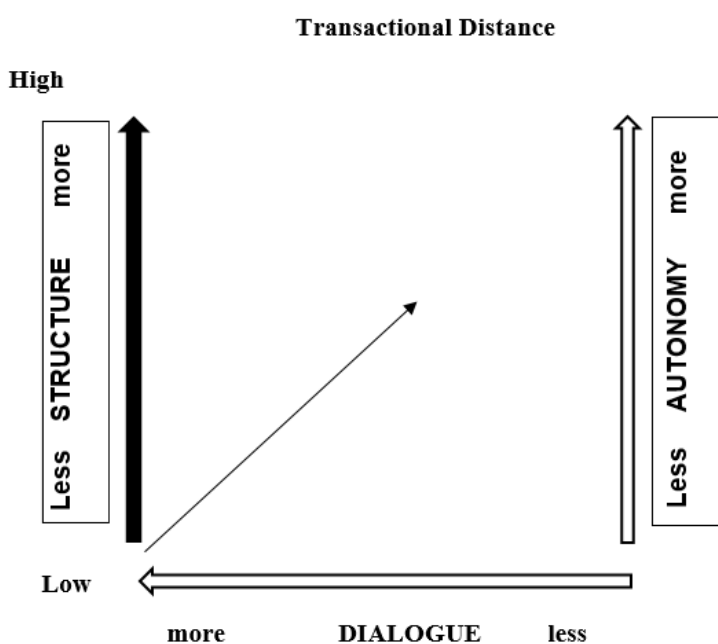
The first research question was formulated to understand students' pedagogical needs in their Academic Writing module at the start of the semester. The results indicated that students were honest and open about what they wanted lecturers to include in the module. This result has been verified by Raman and Nedungadi (2020) who argue that online student pre-evaluation responses allow students to comment freely, with no bias or judgment and it gives students more time to process their thinking. The detailed responses received from students may lead one to assume that students consider themselves experts of their own learning processes using student evaluations (Borch, 2020). This finding is echoed by lecturer 1 when she noted that students know what works best for them. Students may be noted as co-creators of knowledge in pedagogy. The pre-evaluation is one way of getting students involved in their own learning. Another finding was that students went into the module with preconceived ideas that the module is a difficult one and they afraid of failing the ENG321 module. Students requested supplemental learning tools and the need for more communication to make the module easier to understand. The type of responses received from students reveals that student evaluations can be an informational tool for lecturers to foster effective teaching and learning (Garris & Fleck, 2022; Plante et al., 2021; Serin, 2019). As we are now in a post COVID-19 pandemic (Garris & Fleck, 2022), it is imperative that lecturers are constantly aware of students' pedagogical needs, not just at the beginning or end of a course, but throughout the learning process. If lecturers did not read or take these students' voices into consideration, then the transactional distance between them and their lecturers would become wider (Huang et al., 2016; Moore, 1993; Zhang, 2003). The increased distance between lecturers and students would be detrimental to students' performance and attitudes in the module. The increased dialogue from the students and the action from lecturers to respond to their needs could decrease the transactional distance (see Figure 1).

The second research question attempted to understand how lecturers responded to students' responses in the pre-evaluation questions. According to the lecturers' responses, the student evaluations have positively impacted on most of their pedagogies. It is interesting to note that some lecturers used their improved pedagogical abilities to help students in other modules. When lecturers revealed that student feedback in the evaluations improved at the end of the module which strengthened the quality of their teaching and learning, student evaluations have a positive impact on pedagogy. This finding is supported by Maiyo (2018) and Serin (2019) who argue that student evaluations improve pedagogy and student interaction in a module. When lecturers do not engage with the student evaluations by having a lack of relational pedagogy (lecturers 5 and 6), the transactional distance gap between them and students gets wider (Huang et al., 2016; Zhang, 2003). The effect of this is that students may be isolated from their lecturer, their content material and each other (Sevnarayan, 2022). The requirement to create communication amongst the lecturers and students can be met by cultivating a feeling of community among lecturers, students, and the subject matter, which is known as a community of practice.

The third research question attempted to corroborate findings from the first and second question through observation. The observations revealed that lecturers provided all the pedagogical strategies which students requested in the pre-evaluation responses. In addition, it was found that lecturers provided more than what students requested in their evaluation responses. In addition to providing a very informational and appealing site, the lecturers have added an emotional element to their pedagogy by exhibiting care through Telegram and through the motivational TikTok videos they posted. This could be since they were motivated by the students' positive responses, or the lecturers could have an added sense of relational pedagogy. The observations confirm findings by Naomi et al. (2022) and Serin (2009) when they argue that student evaluations do impact on lecturers' pedagogies positively. Relational pedagogy was present in the module when the lecturers who engaged positively and proactively with students created a sense of belonging in the module through various initiatives (Bell, 2022). Although there are scholars (Jones et al., 2022; Simpson & Sigauw, 2000; Youmans & Lee, 2007) who believe that students are not qualified to give lecturers input on their pedagogies, this article shows that students are the best judges of their own learning. As this study adopted Moore's (1993) theory of transactional distance to understand how student evaluations impact on lecturers' pedagogies, Figure 6 below shows the narrowing of transactional distance between students and lecturers in the ENG321 module.

Figure 6

Reduced transactional distance in the ENG321 module



Due to the increase in pedagogical initiatives of lecturers in the module, Figure 6 shows a decreased transactional distance between students and lecturers (Zhang, 2003). This could be due to a well-designed and structured LMS, the increase in dialogue from both students and lecturers as well as the decrease of autonomy (Huang et al., 2016) placed on the students due to increased lecturer activity. It must be mentioned that student evaluations are one of the ways in decreasing transactional distance in a module; there are other ways to do so (see Sevnarayan, 2022). Sevnarayan (2022) argues that if transactional distance is not reduced in a module, effective teaching and learning cannot occur.

5. Conclusion and Implications for Further Research

As distance education institutions return to a new normal of the post-pandemic academic environment, online student evaluations will continue to provide a reliable, valid means to interpret student voices in curriculum planning and teaching efficacy. Student evaluations are an

excellent method to reduce transactional distance between students and lectures in distance learning contexts. It is time to stop asking students about their satisfaction in a module and start asking them for feedback on what helped and impeded their learning if student evaluation data are to be used as intended to enhance teaching and learning and be included into student learning processes. Methods of evaluation are an educational tool that may increase future student learning processes. This research is significant as it could be used to inform decision-making regarding institutional policies on course evaluation methods within a module and their continued use throughout a semester or year. As this study focused primarily on pre-evaluation questions, further research should be done on how students' viewed lecturers' pedagogies during the course (mid-semester evaluations) and at their satisfaction at the end of the course (post-semester evaluations). It is also worth exploring the usability of students' evaluation responses and lecturers' lack of relational pedagogy to student evaluations. As we are on the brink of the post COVID-19 pandemic, it would be interesting to understand how students' responses have evolved before, during and post the pandemic. Transactional distance is not just geographical, lecturers need to be aware the distance can be emotional, social, and psychological too. In either case, we must recognize that student feedback is a process rather than a simple delivery of information; as a result, lecturers in HEIs urgently need to respond to student evaluations in constructive ways.

Funding: No funding source is reported for this study.

Declaration of interest: No conflict of interest is declared by author.

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