Lecturers' perceptions of enhancing student engagement through anonymous online engagement strategies

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Abstract

Student engagement is widely acknowledged as significantly impacting academic accomplishment and learning in higher education, and it is frequently theorised and researched. However, institutions of higher learning have historically grappled with effective and sustainable ways of engaging students online in the teaching and learning process. The COVID-19 pandemic, with its extensive lockdowns and instant shift to fully online teaching and learning, created a more challenging context for student engagement. During this time, faculties and departments shifted from face-to-face to online teaching to continue teaching and learning activities. The emergency remote teaching context impacted student engagement in a wide range of ways and created an opportunity to understand student engagement in different contexts. This dissertation seeks to explore lecturers' perceptions and experiences of student engagement in online learning, with a particular focus on anonymous engagement as a strategy to enhance student engagement in online learning.

I have adopted three conceptual frameworks: Moore's Interaction Model, the Dimensions of Engagement Framework, and finally the Bioecological Model of Student Engagement to underpin the study. Moore's Interaction Model points to the importance of different types of interactions in online learning (learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner); the Dimensions of Engagement Framework emphasises the multifaceted nature of engagement (behavioural, cognitive, and affective); and the Bioecological Model of Student Engagement positions student engagement within a broader context through examining micro-, meso-, and macro-systems drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem. The focus in this study was primarily on two levels: the microsystem and the mesosystem to answer the following research question:

"What are instructors' perceptions of the potential for anonymous online tools to enhance student engagement?"

This main research questions led to the following sub-questions:

1. How do lecturers conceptualise student engagement in online learning?

2. What are lecturers' experiences of student engagement in online learning?

3. What are lecturers' current pedagogical strategies to support student engagement in online learning?

4. What are lecturers' perceptions of the effect of anonymous engagement strategies on student engagement in online learning?

5. What staff development interventions could support lecturers in improving student engagement in online and blended learning contexts?

The study was conducted on one campus at a historically disadvantaged institution. The five participating lecturers were purposefully selected from the Department of Management and Governance. Qualitative data was collected in three phases which were as follows: a first round of interviews, an intervention workshop and a second round of interviews and findings were interpreted through deductive thematic analysis.

Initial findings suggested that moving into an online environment caused major challenges as engagement in online spaces was not as easily achieved as in a face-to-face environment. Staff reported that engagement could not be enforced in the same way as in face-to-face contexts, and as such, students seem not to comply online, suggesting that compliance-oriented approaches do not translate easily into online contexts. The study also reveals a lack of interest and opportunities for affective engagement during online learning. Additionally, the study reveals that anonymous engagement strategies have the potential to increase student engagement in an online environment when purposefully included in the design of online courses. In an effort to enhance student engagement online, the study recommends a collaborative approach among lecturers, staff developers and management to broaden an understanding of student engagement from a limited focus on the individual, either student or lecturer, to an awareness of the impact of socio-cultural practices and contexts on engagement practices in the online space.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this research work to my loving family for always supporting me. Firstly I would like to extend my deepest appreciation to my wife Zisanda Sivuyisiwe Mdanyana for being my pillar of strength. She has given me all the support even in difficult times where I needed to take care of her but she would understand and allow me to work those early morning shifts and night shifts. She was backing me up with prayers in every step of this project. Indeed behind every progressive man there is a praying wife. May God bless you Mambhele and grant you all the desires of your heart, I love you. I also want to extend a word of gratitude to my daughter Inothando Zimi Mdanyana for understanding when daddy would leave her and go to the library for longer hours. She would welcome me with a big smile on my way back and we would play to catchup for the time daddy was not around, I appreciate and love you Inodza,Winidza ka daddy. Lastly, I would like to appreciate my mother, Magxarha, my brothers, Siya and Msa and my two niece, Lelethu and Kamva for their belief in me and understanding when I was scarce at home. All of you are appreciated for your support and I pray that God continue to bless the work of your hands.

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God bless you all.

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Acronyms

WSU	Walter Sisulu University
RQ	Research Question
SE	Student engagement
COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease 2019
HE	Higher Education
SES	Socio Economic Status

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Introduction

Student engagement has been extensively researched in higher education contexts, with many studies acknowledging its critical role in learning and achievement both globally and in South Africa (Kahu, 2013; Schreiber & Yu, 2016; Lei, Cui & Zhou, 2018; Nguyen, 2019). Student engagement is also recognised for its significant role in improving the quality of education (McCormick, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2013). Furthermore, studies show a correlation of student engagement with satisfaction, academic achievement and persistence (Kahu, 2013; Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Lohmann et al., 2018; Halverson & Graham, 2019).

In the existing literature, definitions of student engagement have changed quite dramatically over the last few decades. While initially scholars such as Astin (1998) focused mainly on the individual and their time on task, others such as Moore (1989) added more nuanced understandings of student engagement including who or what students engage with, while others focused on the quality of engagement such as cognitive, behavioural and affective dimensions Fredricks (2004a). Most recently scholars have broadened the exploration of student engagement to move from the individual to the sociocultural context they are embedded in, adding a bioecological lens to the work (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019). In this study, I am adopting these more recent definitions of student engagement. This suggests that engaged students are active contributors in the learning process rather than passive observers of the lecturer as the "sage on the stage" (Morrison, 2014; Sesmiyanti, 2018). The move to online remote teaching and learning during COVID-19 has increased the debate around students' online engagement. Although there are a number of studies that aim to provide a better understanding of the concept of student online engagement (Farrell & Brunton, 2020), there are few studies that focus on the role of lecturer strategies on enhancing student engagement online (Freeman & Bamford, 2004; Owusu-Agyeman, 2022).

1.2 Context of the study

The institution under study is based in the Eastern Cape, a largely rural province of South Africa. Walter Sisulu University (WSU) is a University of Technology, categorised as a historically disadvantaged institution, resulting from the merger of the University of Transkei, Border Technikon and Eastern Cape Technikon (Songca, Ndebele & Mbodila, in press). The institution currently serves around 33 000 students

across the four campuses in the Eastern Cape, a largely rural province in South Africa (Songca, Ndebele & Mbodila, in press). The majority of students are from previously disadvantaged backgrounds with poor proficiency in English for academic purposes.

As part of its vision to be a technology-infused African university, the institution adopted e-learning as far back as 2009 (Dwayi, 2011; Ngandu, 2015). At the time, the focus was on promoting the learning management system (LMS). In that process, computer labs were established on all four campuses. Staff development was also at the core of these initiatives. E-learning specialists and Educational technologists from the Learning and Teaching with Technology unit were employed to train academic staff and students on how to use the institutional Learning Management System, WiSeUp, (Dwayi, 2011).

This unit services a diverse group of students and lecturers with varying interests in and understandings of pedagogic strategies and principles. In the current staff development programmes, pedagogy is at the core and technology is seen as supporting pedagogical approaches selected by lecturers. As with many institutions nationally, lecturers at this institution opted to teach online to ensure that teaching and learning continued, and with the hope that they could save the academic year and save lives (Czerniewicz et al., 2020). Lecturers have used a number of tools such as WhatsApp, Blackboard, Moodle, MS Teams, Google Meet and Zoom to deliver their content online (Makwembere, Matarirano & Jere, 2021). On all these technological platforms, the focus was on sharing learning resources with students (Hassenfeld, 2017). On the LMS, content was uploaded, and the discussion forum was the dominant tool for online engagement (Makwembere, Matarirano & Jere, 2021). Through the use of multiple technological platforms and the sharing of learning resources with students, lecturers are able to supplement face-to-face lectures and maintain continuity of teaching during challenging times.

1.3 Problem Statement

With higher education institutions increasingly shifting to online learning, the imperative of enhancing student engagement in online learning is gaining prominence (Ahshan, 2021). Student engagement is not only crucial for academic success in higher education but is also a frequent subject of theoretical exploration and empirical research (Kahu, 2013). However, the pursuit for effective and sustainable engagement strategies has been a longstanding challenge for the HE institutions (Khan et al., in press). Despite the recognised importance of student engagement, incidents of disengagement persist, especially in online or blended learning. Student engagement has been further limited during the COVID-19 lockdown season with its unprecedented challenges (Abou-Khalil et al., 2021). With a large proportion of

the student population from disadvantaged communities with little or no background in online learning or blended learning activities, students' experiences of online learning during the pandemic differed widely (Abou-Khalil et al., 2021). When observing the current teaching practices, lecturers grapple with effective strategies that enhance student engagement in online courses (Massie, 2017).

1.4 Research Questions

The overarching research question focuses on: "What are instructors' perceptions of the potential for anonymous online tools to enhance student engagement?"

The study has five sub research questions that are as follows:

1. How do lecturers conceptualise student engagement in online learning?
2. What are lecturers' experiences of student engagement in online learning?
3. What are lecturers' current pedagogical strategies to support student engagement in online learning?
4. What are lecturers' perceptions of the effect of anonymous engagement strategies on student engagement in online learning?
5. What staff development interventions could support lecturers in improving student engagement in online and blended learning contexts?

1.5 Objectives of the study

The primary aim of this study focuses on examining instructors' perceptions regarding the potential of anonymous online tools to enhance student engagement.

Further research objectives of the study are:

1. To explore the conceptualisation of student engagement in online learning from the perspective of lecturers.
2. To explore the experiences of lecturers regarding student engagement in online learning.
3. To identify the current pedagogical strategies adopted by lecturers to support student engagement in online learning.
4. To explore lecturers' perceptions on anonymous engagement strategies on student engagement in online learning.

5. To propose staff development interventions aimed at supporting lecturers in enhancing student engagement in online and blended learning contexts.

1.6 Positionality

As an employee in an institution of higher learning, I have witnessed the acceleration of blended learning over the past few years. As a former instructional designer, I have served in the Learning and Teaching with Technologies unit. Having worked with a number of lecturers on different campuses, I have observed and become increasingly concerned about a lack of student engagement in online classes. I am currently serving in a mid-management position and am also a member of the institutional e-learning task team. Our institution has adopted a “blended learning mode of delivery with a focus on student-centeredness”. The blended learning for student-centeredness also indicates that this is a shared responsibility amongst stakeholders such as support staff, academic staff, students and management for student success.

As a practitioner with considerable experience in student engagement and student-centred approaches in online environments, I was curious about whether lecturers could adopt anonymous student engagement strategies to transform student learning experiences online. My observations suggest that there are few opportunities for students to actively engage with or participate in online lectures. Even when opportunities to engage are presented in online lectures, not all students use such opportunities.

1.7 Theoretical framework

For this study, I integrated three theoretical frameworks to underpin the research. These frameworks, which include Moore's interaction framework, Fredricks' dimensions of student engagement framework, and Bond & Bedenlier's bioecological model of student engagement, collectively contribute to a comprehensive understanding of student engagement in an online context.

1.7.1 Moore’s interaction framework

This framework has been used to categorise who is involved in the process of student engagement in teaching and learning. The framework is based on the belief that there are three types of interactions that exist in a teaching and learning context, and when one or more of these interactions is increased, deep and meaningful learning could be achieved (Moore, 1989). The three interaction categories that Moore speaks of are known as: student-student, student-content and student-teacher interaction.

1.7.2 Dimensions of student engagement

Fredricks' framework has been adopted to explain and interpret how those involved in the process of student engagement engage in the process of teaching and learning (T&L). The three global acknowledged dimensions of student engagement known as cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement have been identified as the key constructs relevant for the current study (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004a).

1.7.3 Bioecological Model of student engagement

Bond and Bedenlier's bioecological model of student engagement offers a framework for understanding lecturers' perceptions of student engagement in a socio-cultural context. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem's theory, the bioecological model proposes that there are four levels of environmental factors that influence learning and these are: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. To gain an in-depth insight of staff perceptions of factors influencing students to engage in learning activities at different context levels, such as microsystem and mesosystem level, Bond and Bedenlier's bioecological model of students' engagement was used as a lens to discuss lecturers' interpretation on factors that influence students to engage (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019).

1.8 Thesis Outline

Chapter Two:

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature pertaining to the main concepts of the study, namely online student engagement, the dimensions of student engagement, anonymous engagement strategies and theoretical frameworks underpinning the study.

Chapter Three:

Chapter Three provides details of the chosen methodology, the process of data collection and strategies adopted, the analysis of data and the chosen participants. A discussion of the ethical considerations for the study is also included in the chapter.

Chapter Four:

This chapter presents detailed findings from the data collection instruments, using the analytical frameworks introduced in chapter two, and presented as responses to the research questions.

Chapter Five:

This chapter discusses the findings and reflects on what emerges across my findings. The findings of this study are discussed in relation to existing literature. A conclusion and a list of recommendations for future research are presented in this chapter.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks

2.1 Introduction

This exploratory study has two main objectives. Firstly, it aims to investigate the experiences and perceptions of lecturers regarding online student engagement. Secondly, it aims to examine the extent to which anonymous engagement strategies can be utilised to augment online student engagement in support of online learning, and under what circumstances. This study contributes to the literature focusing on anonymous engagement strategies for improving student levels of engagement in online courses in the South African context.

In this chapter, I review key research defining online student engagement and examine the current research on lecturers' beliefs and practices about student engagement, particularly in the context of online and blended learning, studies that explore student engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic and research on anonymous student engagement strategies. I have examined a selection of the literature related to student engagement in higher education both globally and, more importantly, in the South African context, primarily in online contexts and the role of anonymity in student engagement.

This chapter also outlines three theoretical frameworks, which, used together, help us to better understand the nature of student engagement and the context in which the engagement takes place. Moore's Interaction framework (Moore, 1989) was used to unpack with whom or what students engage. Dimensions of the student engagement framework was used to understand *how* students engage (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004a). Finally, Bond and Bedenlier offer a way of exploring the context out of which interactions emerge and what and how contextual factors influence student engagement (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019).

2.2 Student engagement

2.2.1 Defining student engagement

The concept of student engagement is not new in teaching and learning; literature suggests that it originated from Alexander Astin's developmental theory of student involvement (Astin, 1998). Astin's definition of student engagement focused on time spent on tasks: "The amount of physical and

psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1999: 518). Since then, however, different researchers have proposed a range of definitions of student engagement that go beyond time on task (Kuh, 2009; Kahu, 2013; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Bond & Bedenlier, 2019). Halverson and Graham, for example, define student engagement as the participation of students' emotional and cognitive energy to achieve a learning activity (Halverson & Graham, 2019).

Bond and Bedenlier's (2019) work on student engagement provides a valuable framework for my study, as they emphasise what influences or shapes student engagement within community and context. Therefore, the following student engagement definition by Bond and Bedenlier will be adopted for this research project, who define student engagement as:

> *"the energy and effort that students employ within their learning community, observable via any number of behavioural, cognitive, or affective indicators across a continuum. It is shaped by a range of structural and internal influences, including the complex interplay of relationships, learning activities, and the learning environment. The more students are engaged and empowered within their learning community, the more likely they are to channel that energy back into their learning, leading to a range of short and long-term outcomes that can likewise further fuel engagement" (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019: 2).*

Bond and Bedenlier's definition emphasises "energy and effort" that produces observable indicators. Student engagement in higher education is well documented and correlates with other student experiences, including satisfaction, academic achievement, successful completion and persistence (Kahu, 2013; Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Lohmann et al., 2018; Halverson & Graham, 2019).

Definitions on student engagement have changed quite dramatically over the last few decades. While initially scholars such as Astin (1998) focused mainly on the individual and their time on task, others such as Moore (1989) added more nuanced understandings of student engagement including who or what students engage with, while others focused on the quality of engagement such as cognitive, behavioural and affective dimensions Fredricks (2004). Most recently scholars have broadened the exploration of student engagement to move from the individual to the socio-cultural context they are embedded in, adding a bioecological lens to the work (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019). In this study, I am adopting these more recent definitions of student engagement.

2.2.2 Student engagement in online contexts

In this section, I explore the differences between student engagement in face-to-face versus student engagement in online learning environments, highlighting the unique contexts that may require different approaches to engagement. While online learning provides convenience and flexibility, as (Bolliger & Martin,2018) pointed out, it also brings difficulties in keeping students engaged and motivated. The rapid shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, as noted by Candilas (2022) , made these challenges worse, especially when students chose to stay hidden and silent during synchronous sessions.

Student engagement is often visible and easily achievable in face-to-face settings through direct participation and interaction. However, in the online context, as evidenced by the works of Tobi (2021) and Yarmand (2021), engagement is not easily achievable, with students frequently choosing not to use cameras or engage verbally. This contrast raises critical questions about the nature and measurement of engagement across different learning environments.

Research by Bolliger and Martin (2018), based on Moore's interaction framework, indicates that the dimensions of engagement (student-student, student-teacher, student-content) are crucial in both online and in-person settings. However, the implementation and impact of these interactions differ significantly between the two. For instance, Abou-Khalil (2021) found that student-content engagement strategies were more effective in online settings, suggesting a shift in the dynamics of engagement compared to traditional classrooms.

Researchers like Goodman and Moore (2023) and Read et al., (2022) have explored effective engagement strategies in online settings, such as text chats, breakout rooms, and discussion forums. These studies demonstrate that while engagement can be fostered online, it requires intentional and creative instructional design to facilitate interaction and collaboration.

Furthermore, Collaco (2017) emphasises the lecturer's role in creating engaging online environments. Unlike in-person classes, where engagement may arise naturally through physical presence and direct face-to-face interaction, online classes demand structured and engaging activities like multimedia resources, interactive teaching methods, and immediate feedback mechanisms.

Steen-Utheim and Foldnes (2018) in their study on flipped classrooms, which blend online and face-to-face activities, reveal that student engagement can be enhanced in an online context with the right strategies. This is supported by Bond (2020), who found that flipped learning approaches positively influence engagement components like motivation and interest.

In conclusion, this discussion underscores that while the fundamental principles of student engagement remain consistent across in-person and online settings, the methods to achieve and measure this engagement differ. Online learning requires a distinct set of strategies, tools, and pedagogical approaches to foster effective engagement, which lecturers must understand and implement.

2.2.3 Understanding student engagement in the African context

This section turns its focus to research conducted within the African continent, aiming to deepen the understanding of student engagement in higher education. It highlights studies carried out in African settings, primarily by African researchers, illuminating ways to enhance student engagement in online learning. This includes examining the strategies lecturers adopted to enhance student interaction and engagement.

One notable study by Ssentamu et al. (2020) in Uganda explored enhancing student engagement in online learning, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This research centred on the use of YouTube videos by lecturers as a means to augment student engagement with the content, the lecturer, and their students. The innovative approach involved creating interactive activities around these videos, followed by using a Learning Management System (LMS) for reflective discussions. The significant contribution of Ssentamu et al.'s research lies in its advocacy for instructors to deliberately design their courses to foster desired interactions and focus on learning outcomes. Furthermore, the findings of Ssentamu et al. (2020) resonate with those of Collaco (2017). A compelling aspect of these studies is their consensus on the role of the instructor in influencing student engagement. They propose that there should be a consequent increase in student engagement by purposefully crafting opportunities for student interaction within the course design.

According to Ivala and Kioko (2013), research conducted in the South African context on student engagement clearly indicates that the absence of student engagement results in low levels of interest and motivation, ultimately leading to low throughput rates. The study further suggests that lecturers hold the responsibility of keeping their students interested and motivated throughout the learning process. However, the study also highlights that a number of studies in student engagement literature, both internationally and nationally, do not explicitly consider the lecturer's perspective on student engagement.

The study identifies four themes that influence student engagement at their institution, namely student/behaviour attitudes, institutional factors, language barriers, and student background

characteristics. To improve student engagement at their institution, the researchers suggest different strategies that can be adopted. Firstly, they recommend that different stakeholders, such as support staff who run the university orientation program, parents, and lecturers, should emphasise that students are ultimately responsible for the effort they put into their studies, despite the university providing favourable conditions to enhance high levels of student engagement (Ivala & Kioko, 2013: 129). The researchers also suggest that lecturers should make sure that students feel supported, listened to, and cared for in a way that makes them feel comfortable and welcomed (Ivala & Kioko, 2013).

Upon reviewing the literature, a key takeaway is that instructors bear the responsibility of crafting meaningful learning activities to foster student engagement in their courses. Moreover, it is clear that various contextual factors impact student engagement in higher education. Hence, lecturers must take the lead in identifying these factors and collaborating with other institutional stakeholders, including support staff and parents, to address them. With this in mind, the next area of focus will focus on specific contextual factors that have an influence on student engagement.

2.2.4 Contextual factors affecting student engagement

As can be seen from Ivala and Kioko's study above, especially in contexts such as South Africa, socio-economic, cultural, and other factors impact students' engagement - student engagement doesn't take place in a vacuum (Bond & Bergdahl, 2022). Bond and colleagues developed a student engagement model that highlights contextual factors that influence student engagement such as family and socio-economic background, language, curriculum, and peers. Furthermore, according to the bioecological model of student engagement, developed by Bronfenbrenner (1994), a student's engagement is influenced by multiple levels of their environment. The microsystem, which includes immediate settings such as family and school, plays a significant role in shaping student engagement.

2.2.4.1 Family and socio-economic background

Students' motivation towards learning and psychological well-being can be significantly influenced by the family surroundings such as the quality of the family relationships, the level of education of the parents, as well as the level of the family involvement with student learning (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019). Family background, including socio-economic status (SES), can have a significant impact on student engagement. Research has shown that students from higher SES families tend to be more engaged in school than their peers from lower SES families (Veiga et al., 2016). This may be due to a variety of factors, such as access to resources and opportunities, parental involvement and support, and positive role modelling. For

instance, a supportive family environment, characterised by high levels of warmth, support, and positive communication, has been linked to higher levels of student engagement (Reschly & Christenson, 2019; Rickert & Skinner, 2022). On the other hand, a negative family environment, characterised by low levels of support, can have the opposite effect. Students from such families may be less likely to be engaged in learning, as they may be preoccupied with other concerns or lack the necessary support and encouragement to succeed academically. In summary, family and socio-economic background can significantly influence student engagement, as demonstrated by the bioecological model of student engagement. A supportive family environment can promote higher levels of engagement, while a negative family environment can hinder it (Bond & Bergdahl, 2022).

2.2.4.2 Language

It is important to note that language has always been one of the barriers in teaching and learning in the South African higher education context Boughey and McKenna (2016) (any references?). When discussing language as a barrier on engagement, it is important to consider students whose mother tongue differs from the formal language of learning, e.g. English in most cases. The literature shows that second or third language speakers, who have trouble communicating their views in English and students who are uncomfortable speaking in front of their classmates engage less than other students (Mukminin & McMahon, 2013).

As an example, a study conducted by Boughey and McKenna (2016) highlighted the difficulties South African students face in engaging with classroom material due to language barriers. The study suggests that it can be challenging for students, especially those coming from different primary language backgrounds, to acquire the academic literacies valued in university (Boughey & McKenna, 2016). The failure to recognize the social and value-laden aspect of academic literacy practices, as critiqued in the article, contributes to the language-related engagement challenges experienced by many South African students in higher education.

2.2.4.3 Curriculum

Student-content interaction is a component of engagement that has been found to be crucial by researchers for student success (Moore, 1989; Bolliger & Martin, 2018). Bond (2019) makes note of how the content should be designed to effectively promote student engagement. Content should be challenging and relevant and be delivered through collaborative and active approaches. The above quoted researchers whose work is discussed particularly in this section takes the point further by noting that it is

critical to design meaningful learning activities that are linked to students and content, for example, constructing critical meaningful questions when using technology such as classroom response systems (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019).

2.2.4.4 Peers

In a review of literature on students engaging in the presence of their peers in a learning environment, Tan et al., (2020) noted that for students to engage in a large class setting can be frustrating as this can expose students' lack of understanding (Tan, Small & Lewis, 2020). Barr (2017) suggests that students should be able to openly partake in learning activities without the fear of being humiliated by their peers in a learning context (Barr, 2017). To achieve this, different approaches and strategies have been used by instructors to ensure the safety of students to their peers. Instructors have used student response systems as one of the strategies to provide anonymity in student responses, this eventually enhances student safety and acceptance within the classroom (Barr, 2017; Papadopoulos et al., 2019). Other instructors have tried approaches where student engagement occurs in an asynchronous format in order to remove space and time boundaries. In these approaches, platforms such as Twitter and other social media tools that students are already familiar with were used (Camiel et al., 2014). Findings on using platforms such as Twitter to engage students were not positive, as students were sometimes reluctant to post publicly due to privacy concerns such as fear of exposing their lack of knowledge (Lin, Hoffman & Borengasser, 2013; Tiernan, 2014). I believe these insights underscore the importance of creating a safe learning environment in order to increase student engagement, which is a key component of my study. By analysing these dynamics, I aim to further explore effective strategies for creating a safe and engaging online learning environment where students feel comfortable participating without fear of judgement, enhancing online learning engagement in its overall quality and depth.

2.3 Anonymity

For students lacking confidence, the practice of posting publicly can produce fear and anxiety (Allagui, 2016). The role of anonymity and technology supporting anonymity in student engagement has been explored in a number of studies and is acknowledged to increased student participation (Patterson, Kilpatrick & Woebkenberg, 2010; Latham & Hill, 2014; Barr, 2017; Tan, Small & Lewis, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Previous studies have highlighted that anonymous online tools can increase opportunities to participate in learning activities. Researchers who explored the adoption of anonymous discussion forums

to improve student engagement found that anonymous discussion forums were effective in promoting student engagement and offered a safe space for interactions (Roberts & Rajah-Kanagasabai, 2013). Anonymity also has been found to reduce students' self-condemnation for making mistakes in class (Abrar, 2018). Anonymity gives students that voice within an activity, allowing them to freely express their thoughts anonymously. From the literature, anonymity may ensure safe interaction amongst such students by decreasing social identity impact which then includes social status, language and academic achievement (Barr, 2017; Abrar, 2018).

Previous studies' findings acknowledge the challenges anonymity presents (Barr, 2017). Bergstrom et al. (2011) noted that students feel less responsibility for what they post, creating a climate less conducive to learning, especially in large classes (Bergstrom, Harris & Karahalios, 2011).

The use of anonymised activities might present advantages benefiting all students to participate without the fear of being judged by other students. The literature on studies consulted reveals that it is crucial to interact in a safe environment without fear of embarrassment and unease (Barr, 2017). Based on the literature on anonymity, students are more comfortable responding to instructor questions for as long as they remain anonymous (Barr, 2017).

2.3.1 What does anonymity mean for students raised in a Twitter / TikTok world?

For students raised in the twenty-first century, creating a strong voice and being heard is important (Tiernan, 2014). This suggests that students feel that anonymity gives the least vocal members of the class an opportunity to express themselves just like the other vocal students who normally dominate class discussions (Roberts & Rajah-Kanagasabai, 2013). Furthermore, in response to an increasingly digital generation of students who are exposed to technologies such as games, TikTok and social media, the adoption of interactive digital learning tools by teachers to support these students in the classroom has virtually grown (Hover & Wise, 2022). Because the social context has changed over the past few years, technologies are also advancing, including teaching and learning technologies. Due to this change, lecturers continue searching for strategies to prepare students for the future. In the past decade, the transition from handheld devices such as clickers to interactive mobile technologies that also guarantee anonymity in student engagement for the purpose of ensuring interaction in teaching and learning has been witnessed (Stowell, 2015). The adoption of these interactive technologies has gained popularity in teaching and learning in response to the current generation of students because of its attractive and user-friendly interface (Mohamed et al., in press). These interactive technologies are documented by different

names in the literature, names such as student response systems, classroom response systems, personal response systems, audience response systems and electronic voting systems (Aljaloud et al., 2015). Previous research has found a number of positive results, including enhanced learning engagement as well as improved student performance, and they are recommended for use in teaching and learning contexts to improve student engagement (Çakir, 2020).

2.3.2 Anonymous discussion forums

Discussion forums, in general, are used by lecturers as a strategy to provide opportunities for students to engage academically (Addae, 2023; Simelane-Mnisi, 2023). Researchers have noted that an increased sense of belonging and student satisfaction can be achieved through active discussion forums with high levels of student participation (Rovai, 2007; Krasnova & Ananjev, 2015). However, anonymising discussion forums can lead to increased student participation even among students who are less participating in discussion forums (Roberts & Rajah-Kanagasabai, 2013; Yep, Tan & Fung, 2023). Anonymity in discussion forums might be used for different reasons such as posting questions, providing feedback and clarifying expectations (Martono & Salam, 2017).

2.3.3 What does anonymisation as a phenomenon look like?

Anonymisation is perceived as a way to encourage hesitant students to participate in class (Tan, Small & Lewis, 2020). In online and blended learning contexts, electronic response systems are one of the most common ways to achieve anonymous student engagement (Latham & Hill, 2014). In this way, the lecturers create opportunities for students to be involved in the learning process for the purpose of increasing learning effectiveness. Anonymity makes sense as a strategy when lecturers adopt teaching practices, methods and pedagogies that permit students to participate in learning activities anonymously.

Addressing the challenge of low student engagement in large classrooms is a significant concern for lecturers, particularly in understanding who might be struggling with the lecture material. To respond to this challenge, several technologies are utilised to facilitate interaction between lecturers and students during lectures. Based on the literature, anonymised feedback mechanisms have proven effective, especially in large class settings (Patterson, Kilpatrick & Woebkenberg, 2010). One such technology frequently mentioned in research is the use of 'clickers', which allow students to participate by answering questions posed during the class (Dong et al., 2017).

The findings of these studies highlight a notable correlation between student engagement and the use of anonymous student response systems in large classroom environments. Such technologies are known to encourage students to participate and provide lecturers with valuable insights into their students' comprehension levels without putting anyone on the spot (Roberts & Rajah-Kanagasabai, 2013). This approach encourages a more interactive and responsive learning environment, which is crucial in large classroom settings where individual student engagement can be challenging (Campbell & Monk, 2015).

Research has also shown that anonymity is beneficial in language learning environments (Chen, 2019). Anonymity is increasingly being recognised as a less intimidating technique for students to build a pleasant setting for language learning because of its effect on boosting interaction. For instance, Abrar (2018) highlights that anonymity can alleviate feelings of embarrassment associated with making mistakes in class. According to Freeman (2006), students are more willing to participate in class exercises when their responses are anonymous (Freeman, Blayney & Ginns, 2006). In a study conducted by Chen (2019), findings revealed that some students considered anonymity as a necessity, indicating its significance in peer interaction (Chen, 2019). The table below gives examples of anonymous engagement strategies for both synchronous and asynchronous online learning.

Table 1: Examples of anonymous engagement strategies

	Synchronous strategy	Tool examples
Online	Use of open-ended questions to collect feedback.	Padlet, Mentimeter, Jamboard
	Students voting in class	Polls
	Co-creation of word cloud	Mentimeter, MS Teams
	Use of whiteboards	MS Teams, Zoom, BB Collaborate
	Use of instant messaging (anonymising chats)	MS Teams chat area, Zoom chat area or tlk.io
	Asynchronous Strategy	Tool examples
	Use of anonymised discussion forums	Discussion Forum on LMS
	Use of student response systems	Padlet, Mentimeter, Jamboard

	Students filling in evaluations forms	MS Forms, google forms
Face-to-face	audience response systems (ie Plickers) for voting in class	backchannel communication through class rep

2.4 Conceptual frameworks

This qualitative study seeks to better understand lecturers' perspectives on student engagement and anonymous pedagogic practices for the purpose of enhancing student engagement in blended learning environments. In general, frameworks are beneficial when one aims to focus thinking and structure understanding so that knowledge gaps can be identified. This study's conceptual framework is based on previous research completed and seminal works on student engagement. In a journey of working towards understanding lecturers' experiences and perceptions concerning student engagement, I will consider a framework that will show who is involved in the process of student engagement, how they are involved and what factors influence the whole process. Moore (1989) described how interactions are essential in student engagement and who is involved in those interactions (Moore, 1989). Going through Moore's work, one would learn and understand the different types of interactions and how they are significant in the learning process.

Bond and Bedenlier (2019) position student engagement to be "the energy and effort that students employ within their learning community, observable via any number of behavioural, cognitive or affective indicators across a continuum" (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019: 2). From this definition, the question of how students are engaged is addressed. Based on these researchers' work, "Engagement does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it is impacted and influenced by many contextual factors, and it is vital that these wider influences be considered when exploring student engagement" (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019: 2).

2.4.1 Moore's Interaction Model

To understand different interaction categories that exist in education, Moore's Interaction Model (1989) is proposed as a lens through which interactions will be interpreted. Moore's interaction model is based on the belief that three types of interactions exist in a teaching and learning context, and when one or more of these interactions is increased, deep and meaningful learning could be achieved (Moore, 1989). The previous literature on distance education shows that one of the major models defining online

interactions is Moore's Interaction Model. This model strongly suggests three interaction categories: student-student, student-content and student-teacher interaction (Moore, 1989). Student-student interaction refers to interactions occurring amongst students working together in smaller groups. According to Moore (1989), student-teacher interaction focuses on the dialogue that exists between students and teachers. Student-teacher interaction may be focused on providing emotional and motivational support (Ruzek et al., 2016). Student-content interaction has been defined as "the process of intellectually interacting with the content that results in changes in the learner's understanding, the learner's perspective, or the cognitive structures of the learner's mind" (Moore, 1989). Moore (1989) positions "interaction to some extent as instrumental in distance education and it is useful to foster deep and meaningful learning". Moore's interaction model will assist the researcher to explain and interpret who is involved in the process of student engagement in teaching and learning. Figure 1 represents Moore's engagement framework (1989).

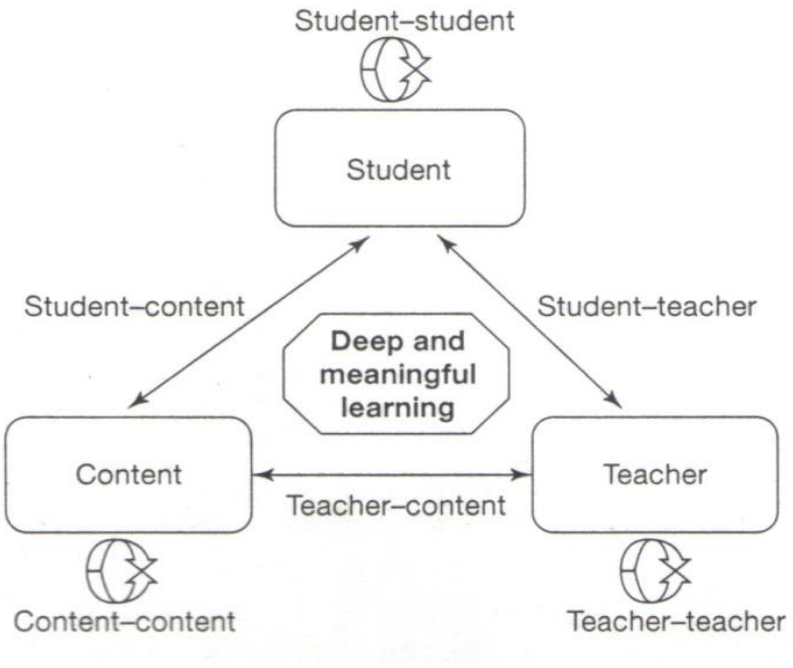


Figure 1: Moore's Interaction Model (1989)

2.4.1.1 Student-student Interaction

Within student-student interaction, students are engaged in the following way: they are engaged socially and collaboratively. Social engagement refers to non-academic activities such as conversations about social well-being. Through these interactions, purposeful engagements amongst students are being developed. In activities of this nature, students are awarded an opportunity to reflect on themselves and

the contexts around them. It is through these social interaction engagements that strong online communities are developed and a sense of belonging is established.

Collaborative engagement refers to the development of relationships amongst students and team spirit that supports learning. This includes students working together as peers to achieve a common goal and to enrich the learning experience.

2.4.1.2 Student-Lecturer Interaction

Within student-teacher engagement this is how students are engaged, they are engaged socially, emotionally and behaviourally. Students engage with lecturers socially when opportunities such as conversations between lecturers and students about social well being are created. Examples are check-in activities that normally take place at the beginning of the session.

2.4.1.3 Student-Content Interaction

Within student-content engagement, students are engaged in the following way: they are engaged cognitively, collaboratively and behaviourally.

2.4.2 Dimensions of student engagement: cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement

The three globally acknowledged dimensions of student engagement are cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). Cognitive engagement is related to comprehension, self-regulation and deep learning strategies. Some of the indicators of cognitive engagement include things like student understanding, self-regulation, critical thinking, reflections, reasoning and things such as justifying decisions. Affective engagement refers to positive student feelings regarding a sense of belonging towards the learning environment, lecturers and fellow students. There are indicators that comprise affective engagement, indicators such as satisfaction, enjoyment, sense of belonging and positivity about learning. behavioural engagement refers to the observable actions of students such as participation and persistence. The indicators that comprise this dimension include the following but are not limited to. These indicators include things such as participation, involvement, task completion, action/initiation, positive conduct, attendance and attempting. Below is a table with examples of engagement indicators (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004):

Table 2: Examples of engagement indicators (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004)

Cognitive engagement	Affective engagement	Behavioural engagement
Student understanding	Satisfaction	Positive conduct
Self-regulation	Enjoyment	Participation
Reasoning	Sense of belonging	Involvement
Reflections	Positivity about learning	Attendance
Critical thinking	Excitement	Task completion

2.4.3 The bioecological model of influences on student engagement

The bioecological model of student engagement is a theoretical framework that emphasises the role of multiple systems in shaping student engagement in learning (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019). This model suggests that student engagement is not only influenced by individual characteristics but also by the broader context in which the student is situated. The model is based on the premise that students are active participants in their learning, and their engagement in learning is influenced by the interplay between their individual characteristics and the environmental factors that surround them (Bond & Bergdahl, 2022).

The bioecological model of student engagement is a framework that has been adapted from Bronfenbrenner's work on the bioecological model of human development. Bronfenbrenner's framework was developed for the purpose of scientifically studying the progress of human development over time. The theory evolved in three phases from ecological to bioecological theory. Phase one was first proposed in the 1970's and the focus was more on the ecology of human development. Phase two kicked in between 1980 - 1993 and the focus was mainly on modifying the theory with more attention on developmental processes. Phase three then took place between 1993-2006 with more emphasis on defining processes and placing them at the heart of the bioecological model. Since 1998, the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model was then described as a theory's appropriate research design. Since its conception, the developing person was either influencing or being influenced by their environment. Hence the Bioecological model of student engagement suggests that influences on student engagement are believed to exist in a context i.e. in the environment they are in. The bioecological model proposes that there are

four levels of environmental factors that influence student engagement: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. These levels are interconnected, and each level has a unique influence on student engagement (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019).

The microsystem is the immediate environment in which the student interacts daily. It includes the family, peers, school, and community. The mesosystem refers to the relationships between different elements of the microsystem, such as the relationship between family and school or between peers and school. The exosystem represents external factors that indirectly influence the student's engagement, such as parents' work schedules or the policies of an institution. Finally, the macrosystem represents the broader cultural, social, and economic context that influences the educational system and the student's engagement in learning.

Bond (2019) pointed out that lecturers possess power and responsibility in ensuring that the first level (microsystem) is designed in a way that enables students to engage taking into consideration broader environmental factors that influence their engagement. In the current study, particular attention is given to the microsystem and mesosystem, as these are the levels that lecturers can most directly influence (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019). This focus is crucial for this research as it aims to delve into the students' immediate learning environment, which is believed to significantly impact student engagement (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019). The Bioecological Model of Student Engagement, as proposed by Bond and Bedenlier, serves as a framework for exploring how student engagement is conceptualised in online learning.

Understanding the context is key in this study, as it seeks to understand lecturers' beliefs about what influences student engagement. To achieve this and to gain deeper insights into staff perceptions of the factors that encourage students to participate in learning activities at different context levels, such as the microsystem and mesosystem, Bond and Bedenlier's Bioecological Model of Student Engagement (2019) is employed as a lens. This approach facilitates an understanding of how lecturers interpret the factors that drive student engagement, considering the nuances of different environmental levels. Figure 2 below represents the bioecological model of student engagement (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019).

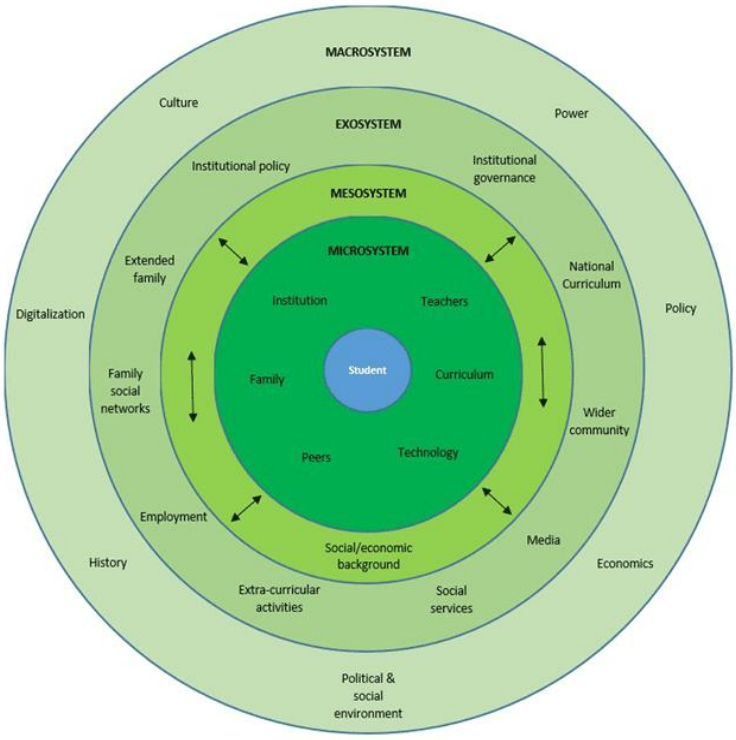


Figure 2: Bioecological model of influences on student engagement (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019)

The bioecological model of student engagement consists of four levels which are beneficial for studying and understanding the context of a student and factors which could influence their level of engagement. From these four levels, a researcher can bring in political context, socio-economic background/status, power and cultural issues. These four levels include:

- The **Microsystem** reflects the relationships between students and their surroundings (teachers, family, peers, curriculum, technology and institution). At the microsystem level, it is always important to consider that external and internal factors influence a student's level of engagement. The microsystem focuses more on the student's immediate environment.
- The **Mesosystem reflects students' backgrounds,** geographic location and socio-economic status. Needs analysis is vital at this level so that potential barriers to students can be clearly understood.
- The **Exosystem** reflects a culture developed by institutional leadership and developed policies. All these have potential barriers to student engagement.
- The **Macrosystem** is the level that focuses more on elements such as culture, power, policy, digitization, political and social environment.

Although all levels in this framework impact on student engagement practices, for this mini-thesis, I chose to focus on microsystem and mesosystem levels since they are the most immediate student environments. Furthermore, the ability to navigate the choice between anonymity and identity disclosure usually falls within course-level decisions positioned across these two levels. Thus, our focus is directed towards those system levels—namely, micro and meso where such interpersonal interactions are most pertinent.

2.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has extensively explored the multifaceted nature of student engagement, particularly within online and blended learning environments. Key to this exploration is the recognition that student engagement is a complex and dynamic process influenced by a myriad of factors ranging from individual student characteristics to broader socio-cultural and educational contexts.

The theoretical frameworks employed, including Moore's Interaction Model, dimensions of student engagement and the bioecological model of student engagement, have provided invaluable insights into the various layers of interaction and environmental influences impacting student engagement. This study has placed special emphasis on the microsystem levels, acknowledging the significant role that lecturers play in shaping these environments to foster student engagement.

By delving into the nuances of online student engagement, the chapter has underscored the importance of anonymous engagement strategies and how they can effectively enhance the learning experience. Moreover, the chapter has highlighted the role of technology in facilitating student engagement, especially in a world increasingly shaped by digital interaction.

As the study progresses, it aims to unravel the complexities of student engagement further, guided by the rich insights gleaned from the literature and theoretical models discussed. The ultimate goal is to contribute meaningfully to the understanding of student engagement in online learning, particularly in the context of South Africa, and to propose practical strategies for educators to enhance engagement in their teaching practices.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

3.1 Introduction

This study, situated within a rural, resource-constraint University of Technology in South Africa's Eastern Cape province, arose in response to the dramatic shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The institution, characterised by a high poverty rate (Rogan, 2018) and predominantly rural student intake (Mbodila & Leendertz, 2020), faced unique challenges in this transition, making the exploration of online student engagement particularly pertinent.

The primary objective of this research is to delve into lecturers' perceptions of student engagement in an online setting and to examine their use of anonymous engagement strategies in fostering effective online learning. The study addresses the following overaching key research question and the following sub questions: "What are instructors' perceptions of the potential for anonymous online tools to enhance student engagement?"

Sub questions:

1. How do lecturers conceptualise student engagement in online learning?
2. What experiences do lecturers have with student engagement in online learning?
3. What pedagogical strategies are currently employed by lecturers to support student engagement in online learning?
4. What are lecturers' perceptions of the impact of anonymous engagement strategies on student engagement in online learning?
5. What staff development interventions could assist lecturers in enhancing student engagement in online and blended learning environments?

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the research approach and design utilised in the study. It provides a concise overview of the study participants and details the data collection and analysis methods. Furthermore, the chapter offers a rationale for the chosen research approach and design and discusses ethical considerations and quality assurance in relation to the research. The chapter concludes with a summary of its key points.

In reviewing the literature on student engagement, it becomes evident that research methods vary, with some scholars favouring collecting data using instruments such as the National Survey of Student

Engagement (NSSE) that can be analysed quantitatively (2001, 2009; Kandiko Howson & Buckley, 2017; Bolliger & Martin, 2018). However, other researchers who focus on lecturers' perceptions of student engagement (which is also the focus of my study) adopt a qualitative research approach, using interviews and focus groups as their research instruments (Bolliger & Martin, 2018).

3.2 Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is defined as "a researcher's worldview with the various philosophical assumptions associated with that point of view" (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Chen, Shek and Bu (2011) highlighted that "Interpretive inquirers attempt to discover and understand how people feel, perceive and experience the social world, aiming to gain in-depth meanings and particular motivation for their behaviors" (Chen, Shek & Bu, 2011). Furthermore, interpretivism acknowledges that people's beliefs, situations, and experiences shape how they perceive the world (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2002). Hence interpretive researchers start with individuals and seek to comprehend how they perceive the world around them (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017). By its nature, the interpretivist research approach is qualitative (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2002) hence it was relevant to be adopted for this study. Therefore, this study follows the interpretive research design. Having to draw upon the primary data generated from semi structured interviews was relevant for this research since my focus was on lecturer perceptions on student engagement and as such, this study adopted an interpretivist paradigm approach

3.3 Research approach and design

A research design is a plan that guides the selection of a research approach and methods. Researchers can concentrate on relevant research designs for the main topic and set up their study for success by focusing on such designs (Tobi & Kampen, 2018). In terms of the methodology followed in this study, I had to consider a few critical decisions in order to make the best and most relevant choice. It was important for me to decide whether the research methodology would be purely qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods. First and foremost, I personally value words over numbers. To get words over numbers means one needs access to participants so as to spend time with them for the purpose of digging deep to get the perspective from their point of view (Hancock, Algozzine & Lim, 2021). Obtaining a greater knowledge of social phenomena in their natural settings is the goal of a qualitative research approach (Creswell, 2014a). Based on participants' actual experiences in their daily lives, it emphasises the "why"

of social phenomena rather than the “what.” According to Cresswell (2014), it entails acquiring and analysing non-numerical data to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences.

The qualitative methods applied in this research align with standard practices in qualitative inquiry, where the objective is to uncover and understand the perceptions and actions of participants regarding a specific phenomenon (Crotty, 1998; Creswell, 2014). A key focus of this approach is to explore the unique meanings that participants attribute to the research problem, rather than relying solely on interpretations offered by other researchers or theorists.

Qualitative research is distinct in its generation of descriptive data, which encompasses not just spoken words but also observable behaviours. Unlike the sequential and distinct phases of data collection and analysis typical in quantitative research, qualitative methods often blend these processes, allowing for a more fluid and integrated approach to understanding data. This methodology is characterized by its adaptability, flexibility, and openness to the evolving nature of the research context (Crotty, 1998; Creswell, 2014).

Common instruments in qualitative research include focus groups, case studies, in-depth interviews, content analysis, and ethnographic studies. In this specific research, the adoption of qualitative methods has been instrumental in capturing and conveying the intricacies and nuances of the participants' contexts and experiences. These methods enable a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis, simplifying the process of drawing conclusions from the data (Patton, 1990). Therefore, this approach is particularly well-suited to exploring lecturers’ perceptions of enhancing student engagement through online anonymous engagement strategies, allowing for a rich, contextual understanding of their views and experiences.

The selection of a research approach was a crucial consideration for this study. An exploratory study using qualitative methods was adopted. Exploratory research investigates an existing problem in a specific context and aims to better understand the existing problem but will not offer conclusive results (Swaraj, 2019). This approach seeks to "understand the world through the lens of those who live in it" (Creswell, 2014; Swaraj, 2019). Adopting this research approach enabled me to answer my research questions effectively, confirming knowledge, addressing concerns, shaping thinking, and suggesting recommendations for forthcoming actions regarding student engagement in online courses.

3.3.1 Site of study

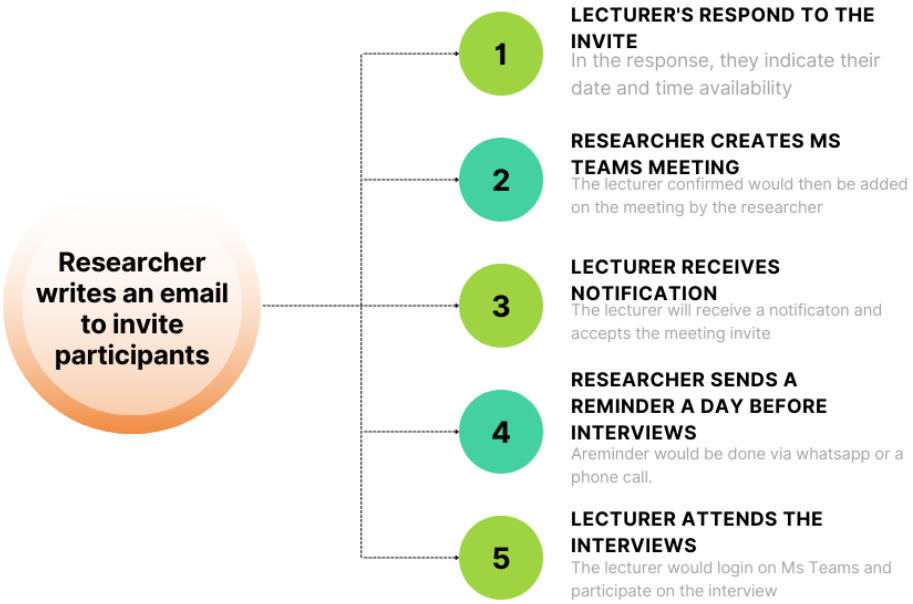
Interviews and intervention workshops were conducted in the Department of Management and Governance on one campus of the institution. This department was chosen because it has offered teaching and learning online since the beginning of COVID-19. Colleagues were invited through the office of the HOD to be the main participants of the current study.

3.3.2 Participants

Participants for this study were selected through a purposive sampling technique. Purposeful sampling is a strategy used by qualitative researchers to select participants who can offer specific and in-depth information on the research topic (Suri, 2011). The main objective of purposive sampling is to emphasise in a population certain characteristics that are of importance to successfully respond to the research questions (Suri, 2011). A researcher chooses individuals from their sampling population to develop a purposeful sample because they possess features that the researcher seeks. He identifies a list of particular features they want to look into and then looks for individuals who possess those features (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). For this study the department of management and governance at Buffalo City Campus was chosen because of participation in online learning during COVID-19 and beyond.

The department consists of twenty-six lecturers and out of these, five lecturers from the department who were willing to participate in research interviews, interventions and were accessible during the research period. Figure 3 shows the process followed to get the participants from the department.

Figure 3: Participant recruitment process



3.3.3 Study design

This study was structured in four phases:

- In **Phase One**, I conducted the first round of semi structured interviews. These interviews were conducted for the purpose of collecting preliminary data from the participants. The data at this stage was analysed by looking for patterns and common themes to identify knowledge gaps as far as student engagement is concerned to design an intervention workshop informed by gaps identified in the first round of interviews.
- **Phase Two** was an intervention - a workshop that sought to address online student engagement strategies, introduced anonymous engagement strategies and gave an opportunity to lecturers to explore anonymous engagement strategies. This workshop was conducted online for a period of six hours over two days. During the workshop, various online engagement activities were modelled to participants such as online chat, textfalls, word cloud creation, open ended questions and polls. The responses were collected and provided a rich background data for the current study.
- **Phase Three**: After the intervention workshop, lecturers were allowed to implement the engagement strategies covered in their courses. I had contact with lecturers during this time to provide support.

- In **Phase Four**, I conducted the second round of semi-structured interviews. These second round semi-structured interviews were conducted four months after the intervention workshop. The purpose of these semi-structured interviews with lecturers was to learn more about their perceptions on online student engagement after the intervention workshop and the implementation of engagement strategies in their teaching in order to refine further staff development programmes.

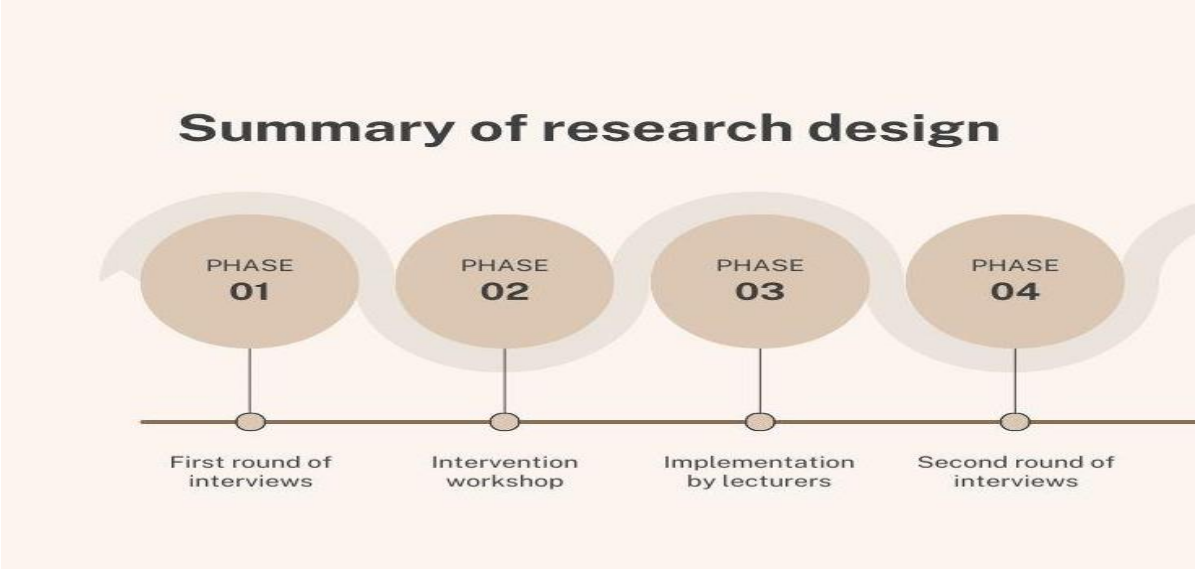


Figure 4: Summary of research design

3.3.4 Research questions

The main research question of the study is as follows:

What are lectures' perceptions of the potential for anonymous online tools to enhance student engagement?

Sub questions

1. How do lecturers conceptualise student engagement in online learning?
2. What are lecturers' experiences of student engagement in online learning?
3. What are lecturers' current pedagogical strategies to support student engagement in online learning?
4. What are lecturers' perceptions of the effect of anonymous engagement strategies on student engagement in online learning?

5. What staff development interventions could support lecturers in improving student engagement in online and blended learning contexts?

The purpose of these research questions was to understand and document the lecturers perceptions on student engagement. It was also important for me to understand how they conceptualise student engagement and see how this was aligned with their current pedagogical practices. I also went further by exploring lecturer's current pedagogical practices and activities that lecturers believe contributes in increasing student engagement online. These questions provided for a qualitative approach, where the research method such as a semi structured interview was essential to capture participants point of view. In addition to the semi structured interviews method, it was essential to ask some questions during the intervention workshop and use open ended questions on a Padlet as a method to collect responses from the participants. The collected data on these questions has greatly contributed in identifying different strategies currently adopted by lecturers to engage students online, as well as documenting lecturer's online experiences on student engagement. For the purpose of having sufficient data, some of these questions were addressed in both one-on-one conversations and during the intervention workshop.

3.3.5 Data Collection Methods

For the current study, the research questions were all addressed using qualitative research methods. Creswell (2014) emphasises the value of qualitative interviewing, which aims to record interviewees' perspectives of their environment and encapsulate the special and complexity of their shared or individual perspectives and experiences. A systematic procedure of collecting measurements or observations is known as "data collection." Data collection enables researchers to gather first-hand data and unique insights into their research topic, whether they are conducting research for commercial, academic, or government purposes. For this study, data collection is the method of obtaining, analysing, and interpreting reliable data from multiple sources to address research problems, answer questions, evaluate results, and anticipate future trends (Barrett & Twycross, 2018).

Qualitative data has been gathered through interviews, observations, and activities generated data and it has been typically presented as a narrative (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The data can be gathered through primary and secondary sources. The "primary data" term refers to data collected by the researcher. Interviews, questionnaires, observations, surveys, experiments, etc. are examples of primary data collection. The primary data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews, data collected during the intervention, and observations of online teaching and learning activities. "Secondary

data" refers to data that has previously been gathered by someone else. LMS Data, marks, internal records, journal articles, etc. are examples of secondary data collection (Mohajan, 2018). No secondary data was used in the current study. Through engagements in the intervention workshop, data was collected through response systems, i.e. primary data was gathered.

3.3.6 Research Instrument: Semi-structured interviews

A research study instrument is a tool for gathering, evaluating, and analysing data on a specific topic. Surveys, questionnaires, scales, tests, interviews, etc. are examples of research instruments (Mohajan, 2018). The research instrument used in this study was semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is an instrument for qualitative research that combines a series of open-ended questions (questions that stimulate discussions) with the interviewer's ability to discover further certain themes or answers to close-ended questions. The open-ended questions were based on the study topic as suggested by (Adams, 2015). Two sections, A and B, were proposed for the semi structured interviews, especially the first round of interviews. Section A was inclusive of demographic variables (gender, lecturing experience, lecturing workload, courses lecturing), and Section B includes statements about lecturers' experiences and perceptions on student engagement in online context both synchronous and asynchronous engagement perceptions. For a well-designed interview structure, I have adopted (Gill et al., 2008) guidelines in preparation for smooth semi structured interviews. A pilot test for an interview is a valuable and crucial method in qualitative research (Aung, Razak & Nazry, 2021). In this study, two lecturers from my institution have evaluated the semi-structured interview. There were some several valid reasons for collecting baseline data through semi structured interviews:

- They provided the researcher with indepth insights to numerous perspectives possessed by participants due to their nature of open-endedness.
- When participants were reflecting, eventually this contributed to deep insights about the phenomenon.
- Influence the opportunities of building and strengthening rapport with research participants at the early stages of the research.
- The flexibility in this method, especially when compared to structured interviews, enables for the exploration or development of knowledge that is essential to participants but was previously overlooked by the researchers (Gill et al., 2008).

The interviews collected information about participants' demographics, perceptions of student engagement, experiences with student engagement, and use of online engagement strategies in higher education.

I conducted about a total of ten interviews, five of those were pre-interviews conducted prior to the intervention workshop and the other five interviews were conducted post-intervention. Each interview took about forty-five to sixty minutes to conclude and all interviews were conducted virtually using Ms Teams. During my interviews, I encouraged code-switching using English and Isixhosa to make participants feel more comfortable.

3.3.7 Field notes and observations

Observing the lecturers during the intervention workshop and during their online sessions was important. Lecturers seemed to be open to new strategies and willing to engage in conversations about these strategies and implement them in their day to day teaching. During the workshop, I noticed comments such as "woow, how can I do that?, this is so amazing" The lecturer's curiosity could be felt during the workshop. Lecturers were very excited about the anonymous engagement activities and that was very visible when they were giving some feedback during the workshop. Furthermore, they completed the workshop activities in less time than anticipated. They were anticipating that since there are no student names attached to responses, they think that students will be able to participate in activities and give their honest feedback. Everyone in the session was free and looking forward to sharing their inputs, they were even laughing, this shows that they were enjoying learning new strategies and new tools for their teaching. From my observations, I got the sense that lecturers are open to learning new approaches and strategies for the purpose of enhancing their teaching practices. I noticed that there were few challenges where some of the lecturers couldn't open the links with activities, those who were struggling were open to say where they are stuck and amongst them, there were those who we willing to assist the facilitator by guiding others on how to open the links and get activities done.

3.3.8 Data from Intervention activities

Data has been generated from the intervention activities, and it will be unpacked more in the next chapter. Data from the intervention activities gave me an insight of the current strategies that lecturers use to engage students online. The data also gave me an insight into the current understanding of lecturers on online student engagement and their experiences. What seemed to come through in those interventions was that they had minimal impact and couldn't change the classroom culture from being

passive to active. After lecturers were introduced to the anonymous engagement activities, from the workshop data generated through polls, the majority was positive that these strategies are relevant to them as they continue to teach online, and they feel positive about the anonymous engagement strategies covered.

3.4 Description of the intervention and staff development methods

Staff development has been significant in Higher Education for some time as it is aligned with critical development in career progression (Baume & Kahn, 2003) and as such, staff development programmes are being implemented to support lecturers on new developments, but results do not always show change as teacher-centric approaches continue to dominate in the classrooms (Ivala, 2016). Another reason why these staff development programmes are critical is to ensure that professional development opportunities for lecturers to enhance their teaching practices are granted, as many of the lecturers have not completed a formal teaching program (Dyjur & Lindstrom, 2017). Staff development intervention programs in general are useful in shaping academic lecturers' effective strategies in teaching, hence a staff development intervention was considered significant for this research, focusing on lecturers grappling with effective strategies on online student engagement.

This is also supported by South African studies where the emphasis is on a number of staff development strategies that are being utilised by institutions of higher learning both globally and in the South African context to support academic lecturers in the effective integration of technology into teaching and learning practices (Ivala, 2016). From the global findings of staff development strategies adopted by Higher Education institutions, Ivala documented a number of strategies, but for this study, I will focus on the following strategies, short courses that are either available online or in face-to-face modality; workshops/seminars; localised peer support, show and tells and one-on-one consultations. In concordance with other studies (Esterhuizen, Blignaut & Ellis, 2013; Ekanayake & Wishart, 2015; van Lankveld et al., 2017), Ivala (2016) concludes that more long-term, relationship building interventions, such as short courses, learning communities, may be the most effective in terms of shifting academics' teaching and learning practices (Ivala, 2016).

For this research, a staff development intervention workshop that focused on capacitating lecturers on anonymous engagement strategies that are relevant when one is facilitating a course online was conducted. Based on the consulted literature, workshops in the e-learning field serve as a platform where lecturers are exposed to different technologies to ensure that faculties are aware of what's possible when

teaching in online platforms (Ivala, 2016). The intervention workshop for this research was designed in a way that covered all three widely accepted dimensions of student engagement which includes affective engagement, behavioural engagement and cognitive engagement. The activities in the intervention workshop were categorised according to the dimensions of student engagement (Affective, behavioural and Cognitive) and were inclusive of student-student, student-content and student-teacher activities (Moore, 1989; Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). The workshop was structured as per the following table.

*Table 3: W**orkshop activity structure***

<table>
<tr><td>Activities at the start of a workshop</td><td>Activities during the workshop</td><td>Activities to conclude a workshops</td></tr>
<tr><td>Affective Engagement activities</td><td>Behavioural Engagement activities</td><td>Affective Engagement activities</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Check In activities
Ice breaker activities</td><td>Cognitive Engagement activities</td><td rowspan="2">Checkout activities
Chatfall activities</td></tr>
<tr><td>Open ended questions
Poll activities
Word cloud activities</td></tr>
<tr><td>student-student</td><td>student-content</td><td>student-instructor</td></tr>
</table>

During the workshop, participants had to take a student role to experience how it feels to be engaged online through anonymous engagement strategies as a student. The workshop was divided into three parts. There were activities to start the workshop. A range of activities at the beginning of the session were chosen to welcome participants and make them feel comfortable in the online space, a key requirement for active participation. These activities were promoting the affective engagement dimension. These were inclusive of check in activities and ice breaker activities, to ensure well-being of the participants and establishing connection.

Figure 5: Examples of activities at the start of the workshop (Ice breaker)

From there, I proceeded to the activities to engage participants during the workshop. Most of these activities were promoting cognitive engagement and affective engagement. These were inclusive of open-ended questions, polls and word cloud activities. I then proceeded to activities that took place towards the end of the session and these focused on reflection and checkout activities.

Throughout the workshop, lecturers were given an opportunity to practically create an activity that enhances student engagement for their courses. They were also grouped together in MS Teams breakout rooms to discuss ideas and strengthen collaboration amongst themselves, build strong relationships and initiate learning communities for effective shifts of lecturer's teaching and learning strategies from teacher on the sage to more student engaging strategies. From time to time, the facilitator would visit all breakout rooms to address any clarity seeking questions or concerns. It was important for me to have this hands-on experience because it helped me with my research to expose lecturers on different online engagement approaches. By trying out different engagement approaches, lecturers saw for themselves how interactive learning could benefit students. This then supported the belief that active engagement is key to effective online engagement.

The intervention linked very well to Ivala's elements on staff development. According to Ivala (2016), workshops can be successfully used as staff development initiatives with a clear focus on modelling how technology can be meaningfully integrated in teaching and learning and these workshops can also be used as a platform for exploration and demonstration of an idea. However, she adds that to increase success of academic staff development, it is important to build sustained relationships with colleagues engaged in these workshops. This intervention workshop's purpose was to expose lecturers to new strategies, new

ideas and relevant technological tools in a meaningful way that can be integrated in teaching and learning. The relationship was also strengthened between the facilitator and participants to ensure that the intervention was long term rather than short term. This was achieved through setting up one on one follow-up sessions, support during synchronous sessions of the lecturers and mentoring of the lecturers in online student engagement. The intervention workshop sessions were also recorded and made available to lecturers in support of self-directed learning post intervention. The purpose of these recordings was to provide access to all lecturers who might need some refresher resources in reminding themselves of what was covered in the workshop. All of this was done to strengthen support after the workshop so that these strategies can be long term solutions rather than short term.

3.5 Data Analysis and representation

In this study, thematic analysis was used to analyse data gathered through semi-structured interviews and an intervention workshop. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method. This is typically used to refer to a text collection, like transcripts of interviews. The researcher thoroughly explores the data to uncover common themes and significant trends. When researchers wish to understand more about an individual's thoughts, perspectives, knowledge, experiences, or values from a qualitative data set, like interview transcripts, they might use thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017).

3.5.1 Why thematic Analysis?

Thematic analysis is the most commonly used approach in qualitative research, even if this fact is rarely recognised (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is the most suitable for qualitative research. Thematic analysis as a data analysis tool has the flexibility and accessibility of a web search. Thematic analysis is the process of recognising themes in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The main goals of the thematic analysis are to identify themes and use these themes to elaborate on research issues. The thematic analysis makes sense of the data and does much more than just summarise it (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Furthermore, Thematic Analysis is theoretically flexible by nature.

The thematic analysis aims to find themes before using those themes to describe a topic or highlight an issue. Effective thematic analysis analyses and interprets the data in addition to just summarising it. Finding themes is an important stage in thematic analysis. These themes support a structured discussion of the results. The aim, objective, and questions of the study have all been taken into consideration while selecting the themes. Coding notes (research journal) and software can both be used for thematic analysis.

In this study, themes of data have been gathered using manual notes. Transcripts have been read and reread several times to identify and extract themes from the data. This type of focused reading has been done for both the semi-structured interviews and the intervention workshop data, which were the primary source for this study.

Deductive thematic analysis and inductive thematic analysis are two approaches used in qualitative research to analyse data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Deductive thematic analysis is a top-down approach where the researcher starts with a pre-existing theoretical framework or a set of predefined categories to guide the analysis. The researcher applies these predetermined categories or codes to the data and identifies themes that fit within these categories. This approach is useful when the research question is clearly defined and the researcher already has some idea about the themes they want to explore (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Inductive thematic analysis, on the other hand, is a bottom-up approach where the researcher allows the themes to emerge from the data itself, rather than starting with predetermined categories or codes. The researcher reads through the data and identifies patterns and themes that are relevant to the research question, without any preconceived notions of what these themes might be. This approach is useful when the research question is less defined and the researcher wants to explore the data more openly (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this research, deductive thematic analysis using the predetermined analytical frameworks Moore's interaction framework, Dimensions of student engagement and the Bioecological model of student engagement were adopted.

3.5.2 How did I conduct my thematic analysis?

For this section, it is important to start by addressing the transcription of interviews for the current study, a critical and common practice for gathering information in qualitative analysis (Azevedo et al., 2017). All interviews were transcribed verbatim in order to capture a complete and accurate representation of participants' responses. This approach is recommended to ensure that data is authenticated and integrity is maintained because it is based on the actual words and expressions of the participants. In regards to the language used in the interviews, the choice not to translate but to use original quotes was intentional. While the interviews were conducted in English, code-switching was encouraged so that participants could express themselves authentically. By using original quotes, the study aims to provide a more accurate and culturally relevant understanding of the lecturers' perspectives by preserving the nuances and context-specific meanings that underlie the language of the participants.

To conduct my deductive thematic analysis, I was guided by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I had to start by identifying my research questions that I wanted to answer through the analysis of the data.

I then developed a codebook or set of codes based on the three types of interaction framework offered by Moore (1989b), the dimensions of student engagement by Fredricks and Paris (2004) and the bioecological model of student engagement framework by Bond and Bedenlier (2019a). The codebook included a list of codes that capture the constructs and themes that I was interested in exploring. These codes were clearly defined and accompanied by examples of how they will be applied to my data.

Before starting coding, I had to familiarise myself with the data. This involved reading through the data multiple times to gain a deep understanding of its content.

Using the codebook, I started coding the data by identifying instances of the pre-defined concepts and themes. I then applied the codes consistently and systematically across all the data. If I encountered data that seemed significant but did not fall within the frameworks or the scope of the thesis, this was coded under Other for review. This data was discussed with my supervisors, and addressed, if relevant, in subsequent chapters.

After applying the codes, I grouped them into broader themes. This process involved identifying commonalities and patterns across the codes and grouping them together under common themes.

After identifying the themes, I reviewed and refined them to ensure that they are meaningful and accurately capture the content of the data. This process involved checking that the themes are comprehensive, non-overlapping, and representative of the data. Finally, I had to interpret the themes by relating them back to the pre-existing theories i.e. Moore's interaction framework, dimensions of student engagement and the bioecological model of student engagement.

Table 4: RQ with framework alignment

Research question	Data collection method	Analytical framework
What are lectures' perceptions of the potential for anonymous online tools to enhance student engagement?	Interview 1	Bioecological Model of student engagement, Moore's Interaction Model
How do lecturers conceptualise student engagement in online learning?	Interview 1	Moore's Interaction Model Dimensions of student engagement
What are lecturers' experiences of student engagement in online learning?	Interview 1	Moore's Interaction Model Dimensions of student engagement
What are lecturers' current pedagogical strategies to support student engagement in online learning?	Interview 1 & 2	Bioecological Model of student engagement
What are lecturers' perceptions of the effect of anonymous engagement strategies on student engagement in online learning?	Interview 1 & 2	Bioecological Model of student engagement Dimensions of student engagement
What staff development interventions could support lecturers in improving student engagement in online and blended learning contexts?	All data	Bioecological Model of student engagement

3.5.3 Representation

I have made a deliberate effort to emphasise the voices of the participants and allow them to share their stories using their own words. This is evident through substantial quotes that provide the participants with enough space to express themselves. Furthermore, the inclusion of quotes in multiple languages, with the original languages preserved alongside translations, further enriches the representation of the participants' genuine perspectives. This dedication to preserving the unique voices and linguistic identities of the participants is a crucial strength of the

qualitative approach, as it allows the reader to fully connect with the lived experiences of the participants without the influence of the researcher's interpretations. By presenting the participants' narratives in this manner, I have effectively honoured the fundamental principle of qualitative research - to amplify the voices of the study population and provide them with the opportunity to share their stories in their own way.

3.6 Ethical Consideration

There are certain ethical considerations with qualitative research. These ethical considerations may arise during fieldwork in the form of interviews. These considerations result from the fact that the subjects of social research are humans (Marinkovic & Lee, 2018). Ethical considerations are involved in both what researchers explore and how they conduct research. These elements support research credibility, increase research validity, and protect study participants' rights (Kazdin, 2021).

Christians (2005) proposes four criteria, including permission, privacy, confidentiality, and performing honestly, to solve ethical issues (Christians, 2005). These ethical standards guided the conduct of this research study. The UCT research ethics committee faculty evaluated and approved this study's proposal and a gatekeeper's letter was awarded by my institution. I conducted interviews, made observations during the intervention workshop, and had informal discussions with relevant individuals. I was obligated to respect the highest ethical standards during all of this fieldwork.

Before beginning fieldwork, I received ethical approval from the University of Cape Town. I was also awarded the gatekeeper's letter from Walter Sisulu University. Further, I also sent an email to the head of the department, and he agreed that I should continue with the research. I then arranged to meet virtually with the lecturers from the department for them to agree to be interviewed. Further, I wrote an invitation email to all the lecturers in the department to participate in the first round of interviews. The research aim was presented to them to make the discussions and interviews more transparent. They were also informed that the data they submitted would only be utilised for this study. Furthermore, post-fieldwork ethics were guaranteed to all participants. They were all ensured that nothing will be said or published that might cause them harm and mentioning of their names will be avoided.

I then examined the data to carefully prevent the study from revealing any information that the participants discussed during their interview sessions. The participants in this research were handled with respect and to the utmost care while adhering to the research's guidelines. Additionally, I presented

myself in a way that made the participants feel comfortable discussing their thoughts, sentiments, emotions, and experiences and expressing their views. To ensure the transparency of the study, the transcripts and recordings of the interviews were securely stored for the purpose of being made available to participants on request. In a situation where a participant would want to withdraw, they would have been allowed to do so. Respondents' identities remained private with the use of pseudonyms next to their names.

For this study, I anticipated approximately ten interviewees but I interviewed five lecturers due to the challenges such as limited accessibility. The initial plan was to number them from one to five but I received advice to give them pseudonym names. Furthermore, specific permission from the participants was obtained to use pseudonyms instead of their real names in the research report findings. In formal interactions, I obtained participant's consent to use their data for the duration of the study. In a cloud storage environment, the data was protected with an encrypted password. The purpose of this was to make the data accessible to participants in case they need it for review or any other reason. I made efforts to respond to all of the participants' questions on the significance of this study.

3.7 Quality in this study

The criteria for assessing this study's quality are centred around the accuracy, credibility, and trustworthiness of the data, which are fundamental to ensuring the credibility and validity of the research findings. Accuracy is vital to guarantee that the information collected and analysed is correct, free from errors, and unbiased. As Birt et al. (2016) emphasise, member checking is a crucial technique in qualitative research to enhance the credibility of results and ensure data accuracy (Birt et al., 2016). Credibility involves the believability and dependability of the findings, which, according to Mbatha, Downing, and Nkosi (2020), is strengthened when the narrative accuracy is confirmed by the participants in the study (Mbatha, Downing & Nkosi, 2020).

Trustworthiness relates to the transparency and reliability of the research process. Morse (2015) highlights the importance of revisiting traditional social science terminology such as rigor and validity to establish trustworthiness in qualitative research (Morse, 2015). Additionally, reflexivity, as discussed by Finlay (2002) plays a critical role in ensuring the integrity and trustworthiness of qualitative research by enabling researchers to critically evaluate their own influence on the research process (Finlay, 2002).

In addressing these criteria, the research design incorporated methodological consistency with an emphasis on transparency and thoroughness. The approach included the precise transcription of interviews and a detailed record of data analysis. Utilising established qualitative research methods such as member checking and the triangulation of data sources, as recommended by Noble and Heale (2019), helps overcome biases from single-method approaches, enhancing the credibility and validity of the findings (Noble & Heale, 2019). Moreover, the research design integrated reflexivity, as outlined by Patton (1999), to allow the researcher to critically reflect on their biases and assumptions throughout the study, thus ensuring methodological robustness (Patton, 1999). By adhering to these principles, the study strives to produce high-quality, methodologically robust research, ensuring trustworthiness and generating insightful understandings of the investigated phenomenon.

Research practitioner's bias can be a significant concern when conducting research on one's own practice. This bias can occur when researchers have a vested interest in the outcome of the research, and their personal beliefs and experiences can influence the research findings. To guard against this biasness is significant when one is conducting research amongst peers. To address the issue of biases in this study, I had to engage in reflexivity, which involves being aware of one's own biases, assumptions, and values, and acknowledging how these might influence the research process and outcomes. This involved reflecting on my positionality, experiences, and beliefs and considered how these might affect the research. Secondly, I had to engage in peer review and seek feedback from my other colleagues who are researchers in the higher education field in an attempt to ensure that the research is rigorous, transparent, and free from bias. This involved me presenting findings to them where they were subjected to critically evaluate and scrutinise.

3.8 Limitations of the study

Out of four campuses, the participants were from one campus, this might have a limited scope in terms of the diversity and number of lecturers involved, which could impact the generalisability of findings. The second constraint was that the sample size was small and did not achieve data saturation as expected in qualitative research. I might have missed some vital information regarding student engagement since the perceptions of students were not covered.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter provided the research methods employed to explore lecturers' perceptions of student engagement in an online learning environment, particularly focusing on the use of anonymous engagement strategies. A qualitative research approach, grounded in the interpretive research paradigm, was chosen to gather in-depth insights from lecturers through semi-structured interviews. The chapter described the research design, the rationale behind this choice, and touched on ethical considerations and quality assurance measures in research. Moving forward, this groundwork paves the way for presenting in-depth findings, analysis, and interpretation in the subsequent chapters, positioning the study within the broader academic discourse on online student engagement.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.1 Introduction

This study focused on lecturers' perceptions on enhancing student engagement in online courses and explores strategies that use anonymity to enhance student engagement to potentially improve online learning. This chapter will present an in-depth findings, analysis and interpretation of the data collected presenting lecturers' understandings, experiences and perceptions of student engagement, particularly in an online context. The participants' responses were gathered in interviews prior to a workshop intervention, during the workshops itself, and in interviews about twelve weeks after the workshop. The data processing, interpretation, and presentation was done through a qualitative data analysis.

As a result of the lecturer interviews, I gained valuable insights and perspectives on how instructors engaged their students during the time they facilitated their courses online. I found lecturers were willing to share their experiences and they were open in doing so. Mixed experiences that include both positive and negative experiences concerning online student engagement were shared. This wealth of experiences offered insights on the complexity of challenges and opportunities that lecturers faced when engaging students online. The positive insights that were shared by lecturers shed a light on effective approaches and strategies adopted by the lecturers in an attempt to engage students online. However, the negative experiences provided insights on challenges and obstacles that were faced by lecturers in an attempt to engage students online. This chapter will delve into both, the positive and negative experiences to unpack the following research question and sub questions:

Main RQ:

What are lectures' perceptions of the potential for anonymous online tools to enhance student engagement?

Sub RQ:

1. How do lecturers conceptualise student engagement in online learning?
2. What are lecturers' experiences of student engagement in online learning?
3. What are lecturers' current pedagogical strategies to support student engagement in online learning?
4. What are lecturers' perceptions of the effect of anonymous engagement strategies on student engagement in online learning?
5. What staff development interventions could support lecturers in improving student engagement in online and blended learning contexts?

The table below shows the research questions, and the conceptual constructs that were used to respond to each question.

Table 5: Research questions and conceptual constructs

Research Question	Theoretical Framework	Constructs
Main RQ: What are lectures' perceptions of the potential for anonymous online tools to enhance student engagement?	Bioecological Model Moore's Framework	Micro system Meso system Student-student Student-teacher Student-content
RQ 1: How do lecturers conceptualise student engagement in online learning?	Moore's Framework	Student-student Student-teacher Student-content
RQ 2: What are lecturers' experiences of student engagement in online learning?	Bioecological Model	Micro system Meso system

RQ 3: What are the lecturer's current pedagogical strategies to support student engagement in online learning?	Moore's Framework	Student-student Student-teacher Student-content
RQ: 4 What effect do anonymous engagement strategies have on student engagement in online learning?	Dimensions of student engagement framework	Affective engagement Cognitive engagement Behavioural engagement
RQ 5: What are staff development interventions that could support lecturers in improving student engagement in online and blended learning contexts?	Bioecological Model	Microsystem Teacher professional development

The data-gathering process began with pre-interviews, intervention workshops, and post-interviews. This means the data was collected during three different engagements.

4.2 Who were the Participants?

Table 6: Respondents' demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	No. of years lecturing
Anele	M	5
Amahle	F	5
Cebo	M	7
Nompilo	F	11
Ludwe	M	8

I purposely selected one department from the institution due to the prior relationship I had with the department and due to the fact that this department was still conducting its teaching and learning activities online. Based on the above table, five lecturers from one department participated in the first round of the semi-structured interviews which focused on addressing the research questions of the study. The participants were the lecturers who responded to the email that was sent to the department, inviting lecturers to participate in the semi-structured interviews. To the first email sent with consent information, inviting all twenty six lecturers to participate in the study, only one lecturer responded. I sent a follow-up email, again the consent information was attached, and a good response was received from the lecturers who were willing to participate in the study. Seven lecturers were scheduled for interviews and eventually five interviews were successfully conducted. Due to other institutions' commitments, two lecturers couldn't attend the interviews as per the plan.

The group of lecturers who actually participated in the study represented a diverse range of experiences and teaching levels within the department. The experience is informed by a number of years and teaching in different courses from undergraduate to postgraduate levels. This diverse range of expertise provides viewpoints from both experienced lecturers and those who are new in the field, and all this expertise is useful in providing insightful information on the phenomenon being studied.

The gender distribution was slightly skewed towards males, nonetheless, gender distribution is mentioned for the purpose of showing the significance of exploring the perspectives and experiences of both male

and female lecturers in the study. An additional aspect of the current group is their collective shift to online instruction due to COVID-19 lockdown.

This was a qualitative study that consisted of three main phases which were the pre-interviews, intervention workshop and post interviews. Firstly, pre-interviews were conducted with five lecturers from the department, using a semi-structured interview approach to gain insights into their experiences and current strategies for engaging students online. The interviews were followed by an intervention workshop, whose aim was to introduce lecturers to anonymous engagement strategies that can be adopted to engage students anonymously in an online environment. The final phase of collecting data were the second interviews, the aim was to capture lecturer's perceptions after they have implemented some anonymous engagement strategies to their courses. Through this multi-phased approach to the study, I was able to gain a comprehensive understanding of lecturer experiences of student engagement in online learning and as such, my findings are captured in the section below.

4.3 RQ 1: How do lecturers conceptualise online engagement?

The first research question explored lecturers' understanding of student engagement, with a particular focus on online engagement. In general, the participants' understanding of student engagement in an online context was closely aligned to their understanding in a face-to-face context. Furthermore, participants predominantly understood student engagement based on how students respond to the tasks given to them. These tasks can either be the lecturer interacting with students, or students interacting with each other or students interacting with the *content* as Moore's Interaction Model refers to them. The participants stressed the importance of active participation and interactions as indicators of student engagement in an online context as Anele alluded in the following statement:

> *"yeah, no, my understanding with regards to student engagement is that it's when I'm engaging with the student with regard to content of that particular subject, for example, it's an engagement, it could be through Teams, it could be also through face-to-face engagement with them. It could be through different learning software that I use, for example the LMS that we are using, Google meet that we can also use or Zoom. So it may also be on WhatsApp. So when you engage in all you're communicating with the students in terms of delivering the subject, or the students may say a question about a particular section or particular topic on the module. So when you engage with*

that particular one, you communicate with that particular thing? That is my understanding of engagement and student engagement."

This participant provided a comprehensive perspective that was also consistent in the responses of other participants who shared the same sentiments regarding student engagement in an online learning environment. This was a general understanding from the participants that engagement occurs when lecturers interact and communicate with students, focusing on the course content and course activities such as questions and answers (Q&A), listening to presentations, discussion forums, using a variety of tools such as the LMS, virtual meeting tools and social media tools such as WhatsApp. Based on the understanding of the above participant, student engagement also involves both delivering course material and addressing students' questions or interests on specific topics or chapters. In this participant's understanding of the subject at hand, student engagement involves more than just passive consumption of information by the students, but also creating opportunities for active interaction where students ask questions and seek clarity from the lecturers. Similarly, Babalwa also responded to the interviews and shared:

"All right, when it comes to student engagement on an online context, is basically to ensure that the students are online and they also listen to your presentation as a lecturer. And so that when you ask them questions, they are in a position to respond because many times you notice that particular student will be online, you will think that the students is online, only to find out that the student is not in the same venue, where his or her laptop is, but because of the fact that you see that the student is online, you will then think that the student is taking part in your lesson. So when we talk about student engagement is whereby we want to gauge in terms of whether the students are part of your teaching by attentively listening to your lesson so that when you ask them questions, or you want them to respond, they are in a position to respond to whatever you ask them as a lecture."

What Babalwa has shared connects directly to what Sipho shared. Sipho said

"All right, when it comes to student engagement in an online context, is basically to ensure that the students are online and they are also listening to your presentation as a lecturer. And so that when you ask them questions, they are in a position to respond."

Babalwa and Sipho highlight the importance of students being present online and listening actively to the lecturer's presentation, for the purpose of responding effectively when they are asked to do so. This suggests that the lecturer's understanding of student engagement leans towards a transmission-based pedagogy, where the focus is primarily on lecturers delivering content in a presentation format and students passively listening in order to provide responses when they are given a chance to speak. What I observed from the above responses is that student engagement is viewed as compliance. In this setting, lecturers are to come up with rules and regulations, then students have to comply with those rules and speak when they are given an opportunity to do so.

The same question was also asked on a Padlet during the intervention workshop whose aim was to equip lecturers with strategies of engaging students anonymously. Some of the responses from the lecturers are captured on the screenshots below.

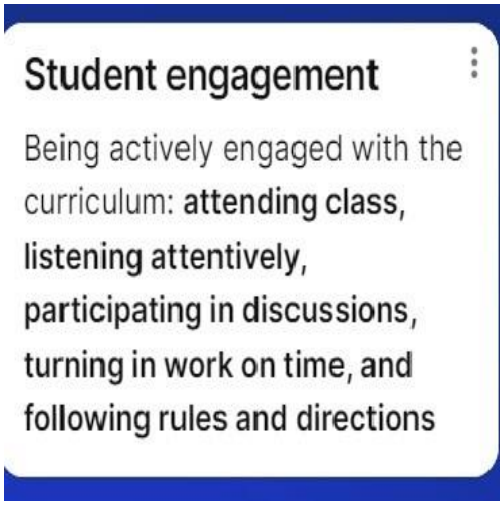


Figure 6: Workshop activity 1 A

The quote provided defines student engagement as an active involvement with the curriculum and the learning process. It involves behaviours such as attending classes, actively listening, participating in discussions, submitting assignments punctually, and adhering to rules and instructions set up by the lecturer.

4.3.1 Student engagement as “free participation”

While most of my participants defined engagement similarly, this one case was different.

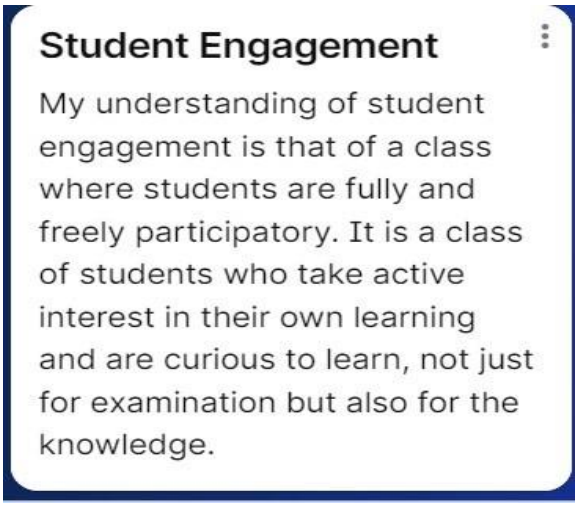


Figure 7: Workshop activity 1 B

This finding is a reflection of the participant's understanding of student engagement as an environment in which students are **freely and actively** participating. In her description of a perfect learning environment, she emphasises the importance of students demonstrating a genuine interest in their learning as well as a keen interest beyond the scope of exams. In this environment, students need motivation, curiosity, and a strong desire to learn. The phrase "freely participatory" in the context of student engagement suggests that the environment should be considered safe for students in such a way that they participate without feeling judged when they make mistakes.

This definition is different from the other previous definitions provided by other lecturers in that this lecturer brings a different perspective on student engagement. As highlighted in this finding, the lecturer emphasises the connection between active learning, engagement, and curiosity as a component of online student engagement. The lecturer has completed a PG Dip in Higher Education Studies, which indicates their commitment to developing knowledge about teaching and learning pedagogies within their field. Most lecturers in the faculty are disciplinary experts with a wealth of disciplinary knowledge, rather than knowledge about pedagogical strategies in higher education. In contrast to other participating lecturers in the department who mostly possess discipline expertise, this lecturer's exposure to pedagogic strategies through higher education studies has provided them with a deeper insight of teaching and learning strategies in higher education context. Taking part in the PG Dip in higher education studies appears to have contributed to a broader repertoire of pedagogical strategies that enhance teaching and learning in the higher education context.

4.4 RQ 2: How do lecturers describe their experience regarding online student engagement?

This study aimed to explore the experiences of lecturers concerning student engagement within their teaching practices. The study zoomed in to experiences and observations of lecturers on how students actively interact in the learning process when learning is taking place in online platforms such as the LMS and MS Teams. The purpose of this research question was to understand the insights and the experiences of lecturers who participated in the online teaching, with a particular focus on how they approached online student engagement, what methods they used in improving student engagement in online courses. This research question explores lecturers' experiences with online student engagement and this section reports on the collective responses from lecturers who participated in the interviews, specifically on the first round of interviews. All participants have shared their first-hand experiences on student engagement during online interactions with their students. Without hesitation, participants expressed at length their perceptions regarding online student engagement. From the first round of interviews whose purpose was to describe lecturers' experiences on online student engagement and how they personally define student engagement, the majority of lecturers indicated that their shift from face-to-face teaching to online teaching at the beginning of 2020 was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Though the LMS has been adopted for quite some time within the institution, teaching online using the LMS and other technology tools such as MS Teams was rapidly adopted in 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. This forced a number of lecturers to shift their face-to-face teaching sessions to online platforms, such as MS Teams and WiSeUp for the purpose of saving the academic year. This is supported by the statement below, where Nompilo shared with me that:

> *"Okay! First personal experience, moving from face-to-face to online was shocking. It was a shock to both me and my students, because we were not used to online lecturing. That is why we had so many difficulties when we started in 2020. And, you know, we've been doing this face-to-face or physical class for quite a long time, and we were so used to it. Then when we started in 2020, It was a shock and it was a bit difficult, I will not lie. We have so many challenges with my students for 2020. Because remember, I could not use this online platform and they could not use the online platforms. So we had to be trained in all that. So it was a complete shock for us in 2020 when we started, but I think for now, moving on we've got to be comfortable in our online platforms."*

Just as the above participant, many participants have experienced online student engagement to be more challenging regardless of the strategies they tried. For this section, three key findings that emerged were (i) Silence dominates in online sessions; (ii) Students multitask in non-academic activities; and (iii) Students disconnect during breakaway sessions.

The sections/headings below will expand on the above findings in more detail.

4.4.1 Silence dominating in online sessions

One of the primary experiences highlighted by participants was the silence that was dominating during synchronous sessions. Several participants reported that students were often silent and unresponsive to questions they were asked. They expressed concerns that students did not participate actively and engage with their lecturers by responding to questions being asked at the end of the presentation, nor did they ask any clarity seeking questions from the presentation as expected. As a result of this silence, lecturers felt lonely in the sessions as they were speaking alone and very few students would unmute and respond or ask questions. Without the verbal student's active participation, lecturers felt frustrated and they pointed out that estimating student's understanding or addressing their misconceptions was difficult. In synchronous sessions, the silence also posed a significant challenge to meaningful discussions, critical thinking, and collaboration. Lecturers expressed that, unlike in a face-to-face classroom setting, they couldn't see a student's facial expression, where they can easily read students' body language and facial expressions to determine their level of understanding. Furthermore, during this time, students had their cameras off due to data costs and poor network connectivity, and lecturers were not able to see if students were paying attention during the lecture presentation as they would normally read facial expressions in a face-to-face classroom setting. Amahle responded and said:

> *"So, you will have a class, you know, online where you will find the students are not responding, you know, you are busy lecturing, talking. And at times, even if you are giving them, you know, a task where you say that, okay, I would even at times say that trying to attract them to participate in class, saying that one of you will be a facilitator, then we also have the moderators, coming up with all these initiatives, you know, but at times, you will find that they will disappear within an hour, when you call them on teams, they are not responding. And then I will end up continuing on, you know, with the lecture, because you could see that there are students who are waiting for you, and the ones you have tasked, you know, are not responding."*

Then Cebo also expressed that

> *"And even our students, they will accept everything you say to them. Even after the session, you said, is there anyone with a question? The students will keep quiet and say no questions. The only question they will raise is when are we going to write a test? When are we going to submit an assignment? You see these are the only issues that they are interested in and, and sometimes, you feel that there are some areas where you didn't elaborate on your saying, even if you are in that situation, the students won't even ask you to elaborate on whatever they see that you need to elaborate on."*

Based on my observations of how participants expressed themselves during interviews, it was evident that lecturers were dealing with feelings of loneliness and isolation. Although they didn't explicitly state it, I could sense it when they paused and took deep breaths during their interview responses. From the interviews, it came out that there was a strong culture of listening and keeping quiet from the students. In this setting, students were accepting everything that the lecturers were presenting without questioning ideas. Students appeared to be acculturated into a passive acceptance mode since they accepted everything presented to them without critically questioning the content. This might be caused by the high school background because students transitioning from high school might not have the culture or practice of challenging ideas. This then leads them to be more accepting of presented concepts without questioning them. Furthermore, online environments, unlike traditional face-to-face settings, seem to reduce the authority of lecturers. Unlike in a face-to-face setting where the lecturer will use their authority and point students to respond to their questions, in an online learning platform, students often feel they can remain quiet, not respond or hide in the virtual space. When the lecturers felt they failed to engage students and create a vibrant and engaging learning environment, it created a sense of disconnect and frustration for them. The participants perceived the quietness and lack of engagement as a barrier to effective teaching and a reflection of disinterest among the students. This situation presented a significant challenge for the lecturers, who grappled with finding effective strategies to encourage student participation. Most participants indicated that in the absence of participation from the students, they had no choice but to continue with their presentations in effort to finish the syllabus. In the midst of this challenge, participants concluded that strategies could be explored to encourage students to actively participate and contribute their thoughts and ideas during online sessions, thereby creating interactive and engaging learning activities.

4.4.2 Reasons for silence in online sessions

A follow-up question was asked to the participants to find out why this silence was happening in their sessions? I wanted to clearly understand why they thought this was happening?

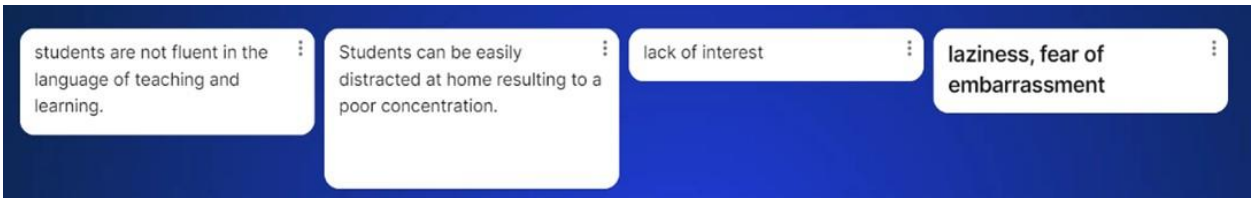


Figure 8: Workshop activity 2

The data pointed out several reasons for silence in online classes as reported by the participants in the workshop as demonstrated in Figure 8 above. These reasons included a lack of commitment and interest from students, limited fluency in the language of learning and teaching, and fear of potential ridicule from classmates in case of making mistakes. The findings pointed out the complex dynamics that contribute to student silence during online classes, encompassing both motivation and language-related factors. These insights shed light on lecturers' experiences in an effort to achieve active engagement and create an interactive learning environment in the online context. Beyond the expected challenges of technological access and insufficient data for students that were reported by participants, the above interesting responses were more aligned with the bioecological model, which is one of the frameworks adopted for the current study. As expected there were also concerns about technology and network connectivity as one of the reasons students were silent and not participating in activities such as questions and answers. Some participants explained that students faced challenges related to technology glitches, including unreliable internet connections, and poor digital literacy skills. They stated that this was more evident when some of the students couldn't unmute or mute their mics whilst others were breaking more often when they tried to speak.

4.4.3 Multitasking

In participants' responses, it emerged that students were faced with the possibility to multitask during online sessions. With so many distractions around them, it was easy for students to lose focus, disengage from the class and focus on non-academic tasks. This was particularly challenging for lecturers especially during synchronous sessions, where students were disrupted by environments around them. It is evident from the participants that some students were joining online sessions from non-conducive environments. Participants reported that they could hear background noise when student microphones were on.

Amongst the things that distracted students during synchronous sessions, participants mentioned family distractions e.g. most students did not have private study areas at home, they had to connect and join the sessions whilst other family members were busy with house chores or watching TV. For example, Cebo shared that:

> *"Many times I've experienced students multitasking and doing house chores. And you'd see some students would open or press that unmute button, and then you will just hear in their background that there is a lot going on. This person is at home and there is a TV background behind. You could hear that some of them are in a taxi rank and there is so much noise around them."*

The above quote highlights a common challenge reported by most participants regarding student engagement in the online learning environment. Most participants noted that students were engaging in multitasking and performing household chores during synchronous sessions. Participants generally reported that this was more observant when students unmuted by mistake or when they unmuted to respond to questions at hand. Based on the participant's statements about multitasking, it is reasonable to believe that the student's environment background was filled with various noise distractions such as television noise, house chores, taxi rank noise and many others such as those. This gives a clear picture of the difficulties faced by lecturers in maintaining student engagement and focus on the lecture during online sessions. Additionally, this quote revealed the diverse socio-economic backgrounds and contexts from which students were participating in online sessions. These distractions contributed significantly to the student engagement in online synchronous sessions. The above evidence represents students that were in non-conducive environments without choice. However, there were students who were potentially in more conducive learning environments but who were actively doing something else, like being on social media whilst attending the session or watching tv whilst attending the online session. These were students who were pretending to be there, but they were actually busy with something else. Two different cases of multitasking emerged here but with the same symptom.

By addressing this research question, I was hoping to gain a better insight into the challenges and opportunities involved in online student engagement and a first understanding of what efforts lecturers put in place to effectively enhance student engagement online. Additionally, this was a critical inquiry that aimed at gathering the lecturers' experiences since they started lecturing online. All the above stated reasons were significant since they touched on crucial concerns of how lecturers navigate the challenges and opportunities of engaging students online. By understanding the strategies adopted by lecturers and

approaches on online student engagement, I could identify the gaps and staff development strategies that were to be introduced to improve the quality of student engagement online. This knowledge gained on identifying the strategies contributed to the exploration of new strategies, tools and technologies that could support lecturers in their efforts to engage students effectively online.

4.5 RQ3: What are the lecturer's current pedagogical strategies to support student engagement?

In this section, I will report on the lecturers experiences and perceptions regarding student engagement and I will report on the findings focusing more on the pedagogical strategies that were adopted by lecturers in support of student engagement online. The report is drawn directly from the lecturers' responses gathered during the semi structured interviews conducted with five lecturers and the intervention workshop. Despite the challenges faced, many lecturers have found that online teaching has allowed them to experiment with new approaches to engage students.

One approach was to use interactive tools to keep students engaged and involved in the learning process. For instance, lecturers increased student engagement by using strategies such as **text chat** to interact with students. Students were given the opportunity to ask questions and respond to the lecture's questions via **voice responses**, which were meant for verbal real-time student - lecturer interaction. These engagement strategies were adopted by lecturers in an attempt to create a more engaging learning environment that encourages student participation. One dominant way that lecturers used to encourage student participation was by providing opportunities for students to ask questions and provide feedback using different online platforms. Lecturers used social media platforms in particular, (WhatsApp) to interact with their students and provide feedback to student questions.

From the interviews there were six dominant pedagogical strategies adopted by lecturers to engage students online. These strategies are indicated on the table below.

Table 7: Online student engagement strategies adopted by lecturers

Strategy	Moore's Interaction Model	Behavioural	Affective	Cognitive	Explanation	How was this experienced?
Voice responses	Student-teacher	✓ Low/ Medium/ High relevance		✓	This practice represented behavioural engagement since the lecturer wanted to see students speak or send text chats.	Students refrained from giving verbal responses in online classes. Only a few students were able to speak.
Text chats	Student-teacher	✓		✓	This practice represented behavioural engagement since the lecturer wanted to see students speak or send text chats.	Students used text chats a lot to ask questions on assessments, e.g. "When are we writing the test?"
Breakout Rooms	Student-student	✓		✓	Represented behavioural engagement since students had to actively work together in smaller groups.	Students were reported to have a tendency of disconnecting during breakout rooms to avoid interacting with others and pointed this to

						network glitches.
Screen Sharing	Student-content			✓	This practice represented the dimension of cognitive engagement. By sharing their screens, lecturers stimulate student's mental processes.	This worked well since students were able to see what the lecturer was presenting.
Discussion Forums	Student-student		✓	✓	Discussions were happening on the LMS, they represented affective engagement practices. They were meant to create a sense of belonging.	Few students participated on discussion forums posted on the LMS but they seem to participate better on topics posted on whatsapp
Collaborative presentations	Student-student	✓				Most of these activities were carrying marks so students couldn't avoid them. Students were able to work together and present their work collaboratively.

The data summarised in Table 7 above are explained in more detail below.

4.5.1 Voice responses

The participants of the study indicated that they adopted the strategy of utilising voice responses on Microsoft Teams to engage students in the online learning environment. This strategy was promoting student-teacher interaction according to Moore's interaction Model. Participants reported that this strategy offered an interactive platform for students to actively participate in discussions and share their thoughts and ideas. Participants added that, by allowing students to use their microphones, they could contribute their contributions verbally, fostering real-time communication and engagement. Based on the responses that were given by lecturers during interviews, students didn't prefer this strategy. Most students chose to remain quiet and not ask questions using voice responses but rather typed and asked questions through text chats. Ludwe shared that

> *"If, let's say you are sharing content, asking questions, you must know that you're going to get silence and even if you will call them by names, they are here on the session, you know, you will find they are not responding."*

4.5.2 Text chats

The use of text chats provided an additional avenue for student participation, enabling students to express themselves through written responses. This strategy makes use of the features of Microsoft Teams to create an inclusive and interactive learning space, accommodating different communication preferences and promoting engagement among students. By incorporating text chats, lecturers were hoping to facilitate engaging interactions, encourage student participation, and cultivate a collaborative online learning environment. However, students predominantly posed questions related to assessments rather than the lecture content, as Cebo explained,

> *"Even after the session, you asked if there is anyone with a question? then the student will keep quiet and say no question. The only question they will raise is when are we going to write a test? When are we going to submit an assignment, you see these are the only three issues that they are interested on".*

This quote indicates that students were primarily concerned about assessments, such as test schedules and assignment deadlines, rather than focusing on the course presentations in depth. Most of the time, students were more concerned about what will be covered on assessments so that they can prepare for them. Students seemed to use assessments as a guide of where to put their focus and energy. From this

behaviour, one can point out that it was the assessments that drove learning. Assessments were a motivator for students to learn maybe because they carry weight in terms of grades. Furthermore, assessments offer a clear set of criteria or objectives, which assist students to prioritise their study efforts and allocate their time and resources more efficiently.

4.5.3 Breakout Rooms

When asked about strategies they used to engage students online, all participants reported that they were using the breakout rooms as a strategy to engage students in online sessions. They highlighted that they would allocate students into smaller groups and from time to time visit the breakout rooms to provide guidance to tasks at hand. One participant cited that she would give other students roles to be facilitators on those breakout rooms as a method to strengthen student engagement. By using this strategy, lecturers were hoping that students would be able to engage with their peers and benefit from student-to-student interactions in a more effective way and participatory learning environment. Participants reported that they anticipated breakout rooms to play an important role in promoting student engagement and collaboration in an online learning environment. Nompilo shared that

> *"I use breakout rooms to engage my students. With those breakout rooms, they're quite handy, yes my students participates there. Okay, because I don't only concentrate on one group when there's a discussion at hand, I just move around from breakup A or B or C."*

Very few participants reported breakout rooms working without any challenges just as the quote above. Though breakout rooms were used by all lecturers, most participants highlighted a challenge in student engagement during breakout rooms, as some students intentionally disconnected to avoid interacting with their peers and blamed connectivity issues. This came out very strongly from the participants as a barrier to smooth functioning of those breakout rooms. According to participants, this behaviour limited collaborative learning, discussions, and the exchange of ideas amongst students. Participants perceived this disconnection as a challenge to fostering a sense of community and active participation within the online learning environment. One response which I had not anticipated pointed to the issue of curriculum.

4.5.4 Screen Sharing

When participants were reflecting on strategies used to engage students online, they all shared with me that they commonly utilised screen sharing as a strategy to engage students in online learning. All

participants reported that they used screen sharing to enhance student-content interaction by displaying relevant course materials, resources, and multimedia content such as videos during their online sessions. By sharing their screens, participants aimed to provide visual resources, examples, and demonstrations that complemented their slides. This strategy aimed to increase student-content interaction by facilitating a more immersive and interactive learning experience. The participants highlighted the importance of screen sharing as a valuable tool for them to effectively present content and enhance student understanding in the online learning environment.

4.5.5 Discussion Forums

From the interview data, it emerged that most participants used discussion forums as a strategy to engage students in asynchronous learning activities. Most participants reported that within the institutional learning management system (WiSeUp), they were able to create topics using the discussion forum tool so that students can discuss different topics posted by the lecturer. It came very strongly that discussion forums were one of the tools that they were already familiar with even before they moved their lecturing to an online environment. Most participants believed that utilizing discussion forums as an interactive platform where students could actively participate in asynchronous discussions and engage in meaningful topics related to course content enhanced student engagement. Ludwe shares how they were using discussion forums on the quote below.

> *"So the Department took that decision. So said, we are going to continue online. So it's been online since 2020. I can confirm to say, this year, things have been improved a lot. Even now we have our students even exposed in discussion forums whereby in your teams, you can create a classrooms or you can split It's your, your your rooms, so that you give them the topics that they will discuss among themselves. And then they come back on the plenary and they report on the discussion. So things that they have been improved a lot at this time."*

The above quote reveals the significance of discussion forums as an effective tool to enhance student engagement, to promote student-student interaction, and to provide opportunities for in-depth exploration of topics. Lecturers also believed that incorporating discussion forums in the online learning environment can stimulate active participation, allow for critical thinking, and facilitate the exchange of diverse perspectives amongst students. The participants also stressed the importance of creating spaces

for ongoing dialogue and collaboration, enhancing student engagement and supporting their learning experience in the online environment.

4.5.6 Collaborative online presentations

The research findings also showed that participants used collaborative presentations as a strategy to enhance student engagement and promote collaboration amongst students online. Most participants reported that they have given students tasks where they had to work together and come with presentations to present to the entire class. They believed that this has allowed students to work together in creating and delivering presentations as a group. By engaging in collaborative presentations, lecturers were deliberate to foster teamwork, communication, and active participation amongst students. From them, this strategy provided opportunities for students to collectively explore and present course content, encouraging them to take ownership of their learning and actively contribute their knowledge and perspectives.

4.6 RQ4: What effect do anonymous engagement strategies have on the student engagement in online learning?

To respond to RQ: 4, lecturers were invited to an intervention workshop and then later to semi-structured interviews to share their perceptions regarding anonymous engagement strategies. The purpose of this research question was for participants to reflect on their exposure and experiences regarding anonymous engagement strategies that were introduced during the intervention workshop so as to get an understanding on the experiences of such strategies. This section will report on the data collected during the intervention workshop as well as the data collected on the second round of interviews.

After the intervention workshop, lecturers had a chance to explore the strategies in their online courses and were later interviewed. Participants regarded anonymous engagement strategies in a positive light, they believed that strategies for engaging students anonymously online were important. Most participants felt that these strategies are relevant for all dimensions of student engagement, these include affective engagement, cognitive engagement and behavioural engagement. Dimensions of student engagement framework by Fredricks et al., (2004a) is very useful in capturing the complexity of how students interact with their learning environment (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004a). Lecturers provided positive responses such as reduced fear of criticism and judgement. They continued further and shared that students feel more comfortable to participate when their identity is protected.

When asked about the strategies used to engage students anonymously, participants shared that after the intervention workshop they used chatfalls, polls, open ended questions and word cloud activities to engage students. These are summarised in the table below.

Table 8: Anonymous engagement strategies used

Anonymous engagement strategy	Engagement Dimension	Comment
Chatfalls	Affective	These activities were used mostly at the beginning and at the end of the sessions to achieve check-ins and check-outs. The purpose was to ensure that students' emotional safety and connection was presented amongst students.
Polls	Cognitive & Affective	These activities were mostly used to provide lecturers with instant feedback on students' understanding of a topic and grant students a safe space to express their thoughts.
Open-ended questions	Cognitive & Affective	These activities were meant for collecting creative responses from participants on the collaborative digital board.
Word cloud	Cognitive, behavioural	This was used to visualise the most frequently mentioned terms and enable lecturers to evaluate collective understanding of a topic.

Since the purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of lecturers on using different engagement strategies to enhance student engagement, participants were asked about their present usage of anonymous engagement strategies, and their views regarding usage of anonymous engagement strategies to enhance student engagement online. Following (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004), I examined the data for the following categories:

- Affective anonymous engagement;
- Cognitive anonymous engagement; and
- Behavioural anonymous engagement.

4.6.1 Affective anonymous engagement

As a way of enhancing student engagement online, four lecturers felt it was important for them to use anonymous engagement strategies that will allow students to express their emotions, thoughts, and experiences in an anonymous manner. They reported that they created a safe and non-judgmental space

where students openly shared their feelings without the fear of being identified or criticised. Figure 9 below is an example of an activity created by the lecturer for students to engage in a safe space and express their emotions. The lecturer used Mentimeter, a response tool, to produce a word cloud tool to ask students to report on how they felt about the upcoming examinations, as captured in Fig 9 below:

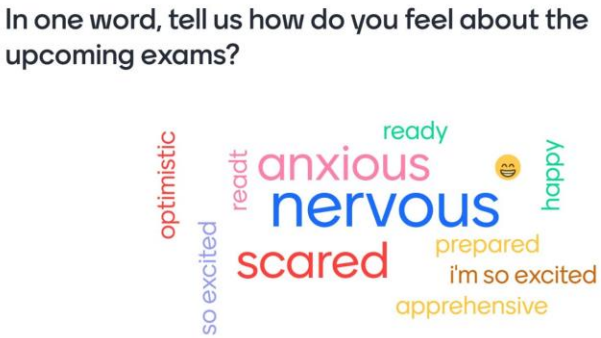


Figure 9: Word cloud activity

The participant reported that it was towards the end of the term, and she wanted to get some valuable insights on student feelings about upcoming exams before she starts her revision class. She reported that she was looking for feedback that would help her understand the emotional needs of her students so that she can create a more supportive learning environment that responds to student needs. From this participant, one should note that effective anonymous engagement creates a positive stimulus and sense of belonging towards the online learning environment.

4.6.2 Cognitive anonymous engagement

In an effort to increase deeper cognitive engagement online, three lecturers have recognised the significance of anonymous engagement strategies that enable students to navigate complex intellectual challenges and tasks anonymously. By doing so, they've created a conducive environment for students to explore concepts, and question lecturers without the fear of being judged by fellow peers. All Lecturers indicated that because there are few students who are speaking in online lectures, using anonymous strategies was advantageous since they promoted freedom of expression and reduced many peer pressures. For example, Anelisa shared that

"All right, you will recall that I made a statement that not all students participate in class online, right? [...]. What was so interesting about Padlet[1] is that it augmented, you know, student engagement in the sense that, perhaps, let's say those who did not participate, they did not have the confidence, because they were afraid of maybe being ridiculed or making mistakes. All that [changes] now with Padlet, because it is anonymous, right? So students were able to participate, especially when the question was posed to them as to tell us about a concept or a topic that confused you, and what is it that confused you there? And because they knew that nobody's going to know who is posting, then they participated."

Anelisa's observation highlights that students who were not free to interact in class when their identities were known and they seemed to interact more when they participated in anonymous activities. More than increasing participation, these kinds of strategies seemed to gather genuine and honest feedback and insights into students' comprehension, as she continues to explain:

"So I managed to end up with a lot of students' honest feedback out of that process. Students were able now, I mean, to interact with me, so it did help out as a form of a supplement to online."

Here there is more feedback from the students due to the absence of fear of humiliation and judgement from their peers and lecturers. In this anonymous environment, students are more likely to express their thoughts and post comments, even if they are uncertain or not entirely confident in their understanding. This is more useful in getting them to think first in order to produce genuine feedback.

4.6.2 Behavioural anonymous engagement

As a way of enhancing student engagement online, four lecturers felt it was important for them to use anonymous engagement strategies that will allow students to engage in actions and interactions without associating these actions with specific, identifiable students. This allowed these lecturers to observe trends, patterns, and behaviours without compromising students' privacy or revealing who exactly is taking the actions. In digital platforms, where the lecturer is looking for honest feedback to gain a better

[1] Padlet is a digital canvas, to which staff or students can contribute and comment. Padlets can be used as a space for student contributions and engagement.

understanding of student ideas while maintaining user confidentiality, such engagement is particularly valuable.

Figure 10 below is an example of an activity where student actions and interactions are not associated with specific, identifiable students. In the activity below, students were encouraged to respond to the question, “What should I [the lecturer] do with the groups that did not present last week?” As the padlet was anonymous, students were free to participate and as such they were able to express themselves in their own Isixhosa language, such as “*xhomekeke kuwe*” meaning “it depends on you” and “*basile aba sir*” meaning, “these ones are naughty sir”.

Figure 10: Open ended question activity

While anonymisation strategies are often conceived of as a way of creating space for students to communicate safely with lecturers, it also provides space for freedom of expression. This creates willingness to participate in a teaching and learning activity without the fear of being judged by peers.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter provided in depth findings, analysis and interpretation of the data collected presenting lecturers’ understandings, experiences and perceptions of student engagement, particularly the focus was on the online context. I provided lecturer insights through the lens of selected data analysis frameworks. Since the study adopted a qualitative approach, the findings were interpreted through deductive thematic analysis. The data was collected through semi structured interviews and intervention workshop. In the next chapter, I will discuss in depth findings of the study in line with the existing body of literature. By comparing and contrasting existing literature with my findings, I aim to formulate recommendations that are based on empirical evidence. The discussions will be inclusive of literature incorporation together with my insights and reflections on the topic.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

The current study focuses on lecturers' perceptions of student engagement in online courses and explores strategies that use anonymity to enhance student engagement to potentially improve teaching and learning online. In the previous chapter, i.e. chapter four, I presented the in-depth findings, analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data collected from lecturers through interviews and an intervention workshop. The data processing, interpretation, and presentation were done through a qualitative, deductive thematic analysis. Using a structured approach, chapter four provided us with an initial glimpse into the data. As I unpacked the information, certain insights emerged. However, while it felt like the beginning of a long journey towards understanding the findings, I had only reached the beginning of a much larger picture. In this chapter, I discuss what emerged as the study's main findings framed by a bioecological model of student engagement and dimensions of student engagement. My focus will be on how the findings align with or diverge from the existing literature, highlighting new insights and contradictions. Furthermore, this reflection will facilitate a deeper discussion of what I make out of my findings and the broader implications of these results, both for the field of study and for practical applications.

5.2 Engagement as compliance

The common understanding from the participants predominantly suggests that student engagement is based on how students respond to the tasks given to them in class and out of class. Furthermore, participants also indicated that student engagement is linked to student attendance, attentive listening, participation in discussions, and submission of assignments on time, in short as compliance with the lecturer's rules and instructions. From our literature review, definitions on student engagement have changed quite dramatically over the last few decades. While initially scholars such as Astin (1998) focused mainly on the individual and their time on task, others such as Moore (1989a) added more nuanced understandings of student engagement including who or what students engage with, while others focused on the quality of engagement such as cognitive, behavioural and affective dimensions Fredricks et al., (2004a). Most recently scholars have broadened the exploration of student engagement to move from the individual to the socio-cultural context they are embedded in, adding a bioecological lens to the work

(Bond & Bedenlier, 2019b). In this study, I am adopting these more recent definitions of student engagement, particularly Bond (2019b) who defines engagement as "the energy and effort that students employ within their learning community, observable via any number of behavioural, cognitive or affective indicators across a continuum. It is shaped by a range of structural and internal influences, including the complex interplay of relationships, learning activities and the learning environment. The more students are engaged and empowered within their learning community, the more likely they are to channel that energy back into their learning, leading to a range of short and long term outcomes, that can likewise further fuel engagement" (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019:2). Looking at the lecturer's understanding and Bond's definition, lecturers' understanding focuses primarily on observable behaviours such as attendance, attentive listening, participation in discussions, and timely submission of assignments. This perspective reflects compliance with lecturer rules and instructions as a crucial indicator of engagement. However, the definition acknowledges that student engagement is more than just compliance but entails deeper emotional and cognitive involvement. These findings then reveal that many participants perceive student engagement as compliance, this perspective is what Groccia (2018) referred to as passive compliance, where students normally take the position of doing what they are instructed to do in order to avoid negative outcomes. In this view, student engagement is interpreted as the student's desire to follow lecturer rules and regulations in order to conform to their expectations. This suggests that when students follow instructions and adhere to set guidelines, they are considered engaged. However, this is problematic, as Zyngier argues, this view leads to seeing disengaged students as students who do not conform (Zyngier, 2008; Bryson, 2014). He even contends that participation and involvement could also be seen as forms of compliance (Zyngier, 2008; Bryson, 2014). In traditional, face-to-face teaching, students are seen to adhere to expectations knowing what needs to be done to prevent negative outcomes regardless of whether they believe the activity is valuable or not (Groccia, 2018). However, this compliance-oriented teaching approach does not translate easily into the online context, where engagement cannot be enforced in the same way as in face-to-face contexts and thus students do not comply in their lecturers' perception, as they for example do not respond to questions. Rather as literature shows, engagement in online spaces needs to be carefully designed, nurtured and supported (Bali & Zamora, 2022).

5.3 Students are silent online

Most participants in the study stated that the instant shift from face-to-face to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic presented many challenges such as extensive silence that was dominating during synchronous sessions. This silence from the students posed a serious challenge to lecturers as the strategies used to make students comply in face-to-face classes were failing to make students comply online. If students do not engage, lecturers can use power in the face-to-face classroom to prompt students to talk. That does not translate in the online environment at all. Students appear to have greater power to disengage online, reducing lecturers' control over them.

This lack of participation from students during synchronous online sessions significantly impacted lecturers emotionally as they felt lonely. The experience of speaking alone without or less response from the students created a feeling of trouble among lecturers. This is also confirmed by Nguyen (2020) when describing this silence as an obstacle which troubles teachers in teaching and learning. This silence resulted in both lecturers and students feeling isolated as reported by Makwembere (2021), causing the transmission pedagogies to dominate the teaching experience. Lecturers reported that when students were not talking online, they decided to continue presenting slides and record for later viewing by the students. So, the student-teacher interaction was lacking because of the silence. The findings of this study affirm those reported by others such as Candilas et al., (2022) who also found that students were silent in online synchronous sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic due to many factors such as emotional exhaustion, academic preparedness, cognitive and affective factors and physical factors (Candilas, Agcito & Escalona, 2022). Candilas concludes by proposing interventions on student well being to foster positive attitude in an online environment for a transformative learning experience (Candilas, Agcito & Escalona, 2022).

Additionally, lecturers grappled to measure student understanding in real time without active participation from the students. A student's understanding of the topic can often be assessed by asking or responding to questions, classroom discussions, and even informal class interactions. Due to the fact that these verbal interactions were missing, and without visible body language or facial expressions to rely on, lecturers reported that they struggled to sense if students understood or not as they could not see the students' facial expressions. These findings are in line with the ideas that are documented by Tobi (2021) who revealed that the absence of verbal interactions and student's facial expressions frustrates lecturers as they struggle to gauge whether students understood or not.

This lack of student facial expression was caused by the practice of students keeping their cameras turned off during online sessions. Although the underlying reasons, such as connectivity and data costs issues, were genuine concerns, they added more challenges for lecturers. Facial expressions normally play a crucial role in traditional classrooms, they often serve as instant, if not always reliable, indicators of comprehension for lecturers. These findings also mirror those documented by Tobi (2021) who was looking at reasons why students prefer to turn off their cameras during online sessions (Tobi et al., 2021). The study suggests that lecturers generally expressed a desire for students to turn on their cameras during online classes as it allows for better engagement and non-verbal communication (Tobi et al., 2021). However, technological constraints such as low bandwidth and slow internet connections often prevented students from turning on their cameras.

5.4 Students multitask in non-academic activities

The findings of this study also revealed that students were faced with the challenge of multitasking during online sessions. Most participants attested that with so many distractions and/or responsibilities around students, it was easy for students to lose focus, disengage from learning activities and engage in non-academic activities such as social media and/or family responsibilities such as house chores and many more. Participants reported this experience as very challenging, especially during synchronous sessions, where students joined the class but focused on something else. Participants could attest that students were joining online sessions from non-conducive environments as they could hear background destructions. Amongst the things that distracted students during synchronous sessions was that most students did not have private study areas at home, they had to join online sessions in shared family spaces. These findings are consistent with the results of Alvarez-Risco et al., (2021) who conducted a study that investigated university students' multitasking behaviour in online classrooms and its impact on their academic performance. That study also examined students' opinions of online class behaviour and self-efficacy. The study reported that the distraction included social media, internet games and online videos. Students were attending online sessions whilst engaging in these non-academic activities (Alvarez-Risco et al., 2021).

5.5 Lack of focus on affective engagement

Student engagement is often linked to dimensions of student engagement and as such Halverson and Graham's define student engagement as the activation of students' affective and cognitive dimensions to

achieve a learning activity (Halverson & Graham, 2019). Kahu defines student engagement as “a student’s affective, behavioural and cognitive connection to their study” which then directly impacts their achievement and success (Kahu et al., 2014: 523). Halverson and Kahu bring in the dimensions of student engagement to achieve learning activity and success which I think is important for learning activities to belong to one of the engagement dimensions. The affective, behavioural and cognitive dimensions they are referring to simply mean three things, what students do, how they feel and what they think (Groccia, 2018).

From the findings of the study, lecturers tend to focus more on the behavioural and cognitive dimensions of student engagement, and pay little attention to the extent to which students are effectively engaged. However, I have observed that there was a lack of emphasis by lecturers on affective engagement to achieve learning activity. Affective engagement refers to how students feel in an online space and this translates to more interest in learning experience which leads to improved enjoyment and motivation which results in an improved level of commitment (Groccia, 2018). This takes into consideration a sense of well-being, sense of belonging and sense of connectedness to class as well as positive interactions with lecturers and peers (Zepke, 2018). However, most participants in the study reported less on affective engagement as compared to the emphasis they put on the behavioural and cognitive dimensions when they define student engagement and this has impacted the course design and delivery to have few or no activities that focused on affective engagement. As discussed above lecturers see engagement mostly as compliance, hence it is not surprising that they tend to focus more on behavioural and cognitive dimensions. I believe that paying less attention to affective engagement in an online context is risky as student engagement online is influenced by a sense of belonging and interest as noted by (Farrell & Brunton, 2020). I strongly believe that to nurture affective engagement, the lecturer needs to intentionally design activities that address feelings of isolation and disconnection amongst students, while boosting the levels of interest and motivation. This view strongly aligns with the conclusions reached by Bali and Zamora (Bali & Zamora, 2022) who observed that learning together can be more transformational when students feel they belong to a learning community. Furthermore, complementing this perspective, Gao (2021) advocated for prioritising opportunities to strengthen the affective dimension of engagement when designing effective online teaching.

5.6 Context and culture

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasizes the importance of context and culture in understanding student engagement. The bioecological model of student engagement, informed by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, emphasizes the importance of considering context and culture in understanding student engagement (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019). As the model suggests, student engagement is impacted and influenced by various interconnected systems, from the most immediate microsystem (e.g., the classroom environment) to the broader macrosystem (e.g., societal and cultural influences) (Skinner et al., 2022).

In this study, it was crucial to unpack the culture and context surrounding student engagement, as these contextual factors shape both the lecturers' understanding and the students' experiences of engagement, particularly in the shift from face-to-face to online learning. The institution where the study was conducted is a contact-based university, where the traditional classroom culture has been centered around in-person, teacher-led instruction and individual tasks, characterized by an authoritative hierarchy and emphasis on classroom management (Bitzer, 2009). This aligns with Freire's (1970) concept of "banking education", where knowledge is mostly transmitted one-way rather than through dialogue and critical engagement.

However, when the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the shift to online learning, the microsystem of the classroom was disrupted, and students were forced to navigate learning in the home environment, which is not typically seen as a "learning space" (Cattan et al., 2021). This change in context, coupled with the increased use of technology, presented challenges for both lecturers and students in maintaining engagement. Lecturers, accustomed to the face-to-face classroom culture, reported viewing student engagement the same way in online sessions, despite the differences in the learning environment and the students' increased autonomy in using technology (Ng'ambi et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the broader macrosystem, including factors such as family income, parental educational attainment, and access to technology, shaped the home learning environment and influenced students' ability to engage effectively in the online setting (Agaton & Cueto, 2021; Bonilla et al., 2022). These contextual and cultural factors, operating at multiple levels of the bioecological system, must be considered when exploring strategies to support student engagement in the online learning environment.

It is important to consider these cultural and contextual realities, the complexity of the micro and macrosystems in which students function, that have been reported to influence online student engagement, when exploring strategies for lecturers to ensure that student engagement takes place (Cross & Carpentier, 2009).

5.7 Lecturer's strategies to enhance engagement

In this section, I will first reflect on the lecturers' experiences and perceptions regarding student engagement, focusing on what lecturers did in support of online student engagement. The discussion is drawn directly from the lecturers' insights gathered during the semi-structured interviews conducted with five lecturers and the intervention workshop. Building upon the literature established in Chapter two, this discussion integrates relevant literature and adopts a theoretical framework to contextualise and deepen the understanding of the strategies adopted by the lecturers in support of student engagement online. Lecturers adopted various strategies in an attempt to engage students online as the literature suggests that there is more that lecturers can do to increase student engagement (Collaco, 2017). Under this section/focus area, the strategies to be discussed were adopted by lecturers in an attempt to build a less compliant, less silent culture that encouraged a more active classroom culture online.

5.7.1 Text chats

Text chat is a tool that is available in most learning technologies and is being used by lecturers as a way to engage students non-verbally for the purpose of improving student confidence in an online session (Goodman & Moore, 2023). Text chat tools have dynamic interactive features such as emoticon which are mostly used in social media tools and most students are already familiar with them as reported by (Tseng & Hsieh, 2019). Adopting this strategy, participants reported that students preferred text chats than other ways of engagement. These findings support conclusions reached by Yarmand (2021), who concluded that online lectures with chat options help students participate more than in traditional classrooms. According to earlier research, students prefer to ask questions in the chat because they don't have to speak up. This helps students who are a bit shy or worried about what others think (Yarmand et al., 2021). Yarmand's findings also reveal that students feel less anxious using chat for class discussions than speaking out loud. This supports previous research that shy students prefer chatting online over face-to-face talks. Motivating shy students to participate can create a more balanced and classroom environment, where lecturers don't just pay attention to outgoing students. Also, studies have found that international

students, who speak a different first language than the official teaching and learning language e.g. English, often feel more comfortable typing their questions instead of asking them verbally (Yarmand et al., 2021). In light of the bioecological model of student engagement, the microsystem which is the student's immediate environment, Bond highlights that there are a number of factors that influence online engagement when using technology in teaching and learning. The first issue to consider is student access to technology. Furthermore, Bond suggests that lecturers should adopt a familiar technology since it has the potential to eliminate issues of low technology confidence (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019). In this case, text chats were a familiar technology because students usually use text chats on social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook messenger.

5.7.2 Breakout rooms

Online learning breakout rooms, also known as breakaway rooms, are virtual sub-rooms that can be created within large online classes to allow students to collaborate as groups and work on assigned activities. The findings of this study reveal that one of the strategies adopted by lecturers to engage students was the use of breakout rooms. Findings show that the breakout rooms were not as effective as expected since students were leaving the rooms and re-join the big class group. These findings are contrary to Paterson and Maxfield (2016) and Chandler (2016) who both found that breakout rooms can enhance student engagement, collaboration, and interaction, especially in online environment. Read et al., (2022) further supports this, proclaiming that students felt they had benefited from the collaborative tasks in breakout rooms and enjoyed them. Agustina (2021) takes this further, using zoom breakout room activities during covid-19 to improve student collaborative activities. This was found to increase student engagement and collaboration amongst students (Agustina & Suharya, 2021). These quoted studies collectively suggest that breakout rooms, particularly when used online in creative and interactive ways, can be effective in increasing student engagement but this was not the case in the current study's findings. Possibly the difference between the results of the current study and previous studies on the effectiveness of breakout rooms in online learning is due to cultural influences. Based on the bioecological model, people's behavior and development are shaped by interactions with their environment, including cultural context. In this study, students' cultural norms and expectations may have influenced their reluctance to actively participate in breakout rooms. For example, some classroom culture may prioritize individual learning over collaborative tasks, and students may prefer large class settings where they can be passive participants. The bioecological model suggests that contextual factors such as cultural norms can significantly impact the effectiveness of educational interventions like breakout rooms. Therefore, the

findings of this study emphasize the importance of considering cultural and environmental context when implementing and evaluating the use of breakout rooms in online learning environments.

5.7.3 Discussion Forums

The asynchronous online discussion forums are a crucial means of engaging students and online instructors are increasingly utilising discussion forums to enhance student engagement (Lohmann & Boothe, 2020). The findings of this study indicate that discussion forums are a commonly used pedagogical strategy for engaging students in asynchronous learning activities. The participants utilised the discussion forum tool within the WiSeUp learning management system to facilitate student-led discussions on topics introduced by the lecturer. It came out strong that the participants were already familiar with discussion forums prior to the transition to online teaching, which highlights the enduring nature of this instructional tool. These findings are in line with the findings of Simelane (2023), who did an investigation on what tools lecturers use on the LMS to engage students, and also found that discussion forums were used to encourage interactivity in an online environment (Simelane-Mnisi, 2023).

Krasnova and Ananjev (2015) supports the idea that discussion forums serve as an interactive platform for students to actively engage in asynchronous discourse and delve into meaningful course-related topics. This aligns with the belief expressed by the participants that such engagement enhances student engagement. emphasise the potential of discussion forums to stimulate active participation, enrich critical thinking, and enable students to exchange diverse perspectives. The experience highlighted by the participants on the creation of online spaces for ongoing dialogue and collaboration is consistent with the work of Addae (2023) and Simelane (2023) on the importance of fostering student engagement and supporting their learning experiences in online settings. This underscores the pivotal role of discussion forums in cultivating an interactive and collaborative learning environment, which is essential for effective online learning. In conclusion, the interview findings are in line with scholarly literature, highlighting the significance of discussion forums as a pedagogical tool that promotes student engagement, critical thinking, and collaborative learning experiences in online environments.

5.8 Potential of anonymising strategies for responding to the existing cultural context

As a result of the existing culture of students remaining silent in online classes and lecturers paying insufficient attention to affective engagement, this resulted in disengagement in online learning.

Anonymising engagement activities was one of the strategies or interventions that I suggested to the lecturers to respond to the existing cultural context so as to engage students in meaningful learning ways. Allagui (2016) noted that the practice of posting publicly by students can produce fear and anxiety, so lecturers should try anonymous strategies and online tools to address these challenges experienced by students. These strategies maximise participation opportunities for students in all dimensions of student engagement that includes cognitive, affective and behavioural engagement. This is confirmed by researchers such as Barr (2017) that anonymity encourages students to be more cognitively engaged in lectures. More than maximising participation, anonymous engagement strategies promoted the culture of being genuine and providing honest feedback and insights into students' comprehension. This is in line with conclusions reached by other researchers such as Barr (2017) and Abrar (2018) who also acknowledge the genuine and honest feedback instructors receive from students through anonymous engagement activities. One of the important findings that stood out was that anonymous engagement strategies created a culture of freedom of expression, particularly important in a classroom culture traditionally based on authority, hierarchy, respect, and mostly fear. Students were free in such a way that they expressed themselves in their own language when responding to some of the questions posted by lecturers. This also led to a willingness to participate in teaching and learning activities without the fear of making language mistakes and errors. In online learning, where the lecturer is looking for honest feedback to gain a better understanding of students, these attributes such as genuineness, honesty and free participation are critical and valuable.

Parallel to the views of Tan (2020), anonymity, in this context, had the potential to mitigate the discomfort and social anxieties that often hinder student participation in a digital classroom environment. When identities were concealed, students felt more free to express their thoughts, engage in discussions, and participate in activities without the fear of judgement or peer pressure. This approach fostered a sense of psychological safety, a crucial element for affective engagement dimension. Furthermore, anonymity allowed for a community development culture where all voices were heard and valued even the shy students were able to express their views. These findings align with the conclusions reached by Tan (2020) where they value the potential of anonymous engagement strategies to support community development by encouraging the less active students to contribute to class activities. Based on the positive impacts stated above, this shift has enhanced the quality of interaction and collaboration among students, leading to an effective environment that is more conducive to learning.

5.9 Conclusion

The main aim of the current research was to explore and understand lecturers' perceptions of student engagement, particularly within the context of an online learning environment. By exploring how lecturers describe student engagement or apparent lack of student engagement when face-to-face classes are replaced by online learning, I intended to understand how lecturers conceptualise and observe engagement among their students. Another critical aspect of this research focused on lecturers' strategies for enhancing student engagement online, with a special focus on the use of anonymous engagement strategies. In online settings, where traditional forms of engagement may no longer be effective or relevant, these anonymous engagement strategies, which allow students to participate without disclosing their identity, are particularly relevant. In this study, I aimed to understand how such strategies could enhance student engagement, positive learning attitude, and overall learning. In exploring these elements, the study provided insights into how face-to-face experiences shaped engagement in digital classrooms, as well as practical implications for enhancing student engagement. The key research questions for this research were:

1. How do lecturers conceptualise student engagement in online learning?
2. What are lecturers' experiences of student engagement in online learning?
3. What are lecturers' current pedagogical strategies to support student engagement in online learning?
4. What are lecturers' perceptions of the effect of anonymous engagement strategies on student engagement in online learning?
5. What staff development interventions could support lecturers in improving student engagement in online and blended learning contexts?

The study focused on enhancing student engagement in online courses through anonymity. Data was gathered through pre-interviews, intervention workshops, and post-interviews with lecturers to understand their perceptions of online student engagement. Lecturers shared mixed experiences of engagement in online classes, highlighting challenges and describing effective strategies for engaging students. The study explored how lecturers define student engagement in online learning, their experiences, current pedagogical strategies, perceptions of anonymous engagement strategies, and staff development interventions for improving engagement in online and blended learning contexts. Findings show a varied understanding of student engagement, in particular, engagement as compliance, with a

strong traditional teaching culture and previous experiences shaping how engagement is approached in an online context, and exploration of anonymous engagement strategies to enhance online engagement. Lecturers used strategies like text chats, breakout rooms, and screen sharing to facilitate engagement. However, they faced challenges like student silence, multitasking, and technology issues, impacting the effectiveness of online engagement. Furthermore, findings also reveal that there needed to be more affective engagement. As such, disengagement continued to be experienced online until there was a slight change when some participants addressed affective engagement through anonymous engagement strategies. In conclusion, whilst lecturers may attempt to engage students differently online, and design the online activities with the online environment in mind, it is not easy to engage students who are used to being in a physical environment, online. Physical context, culture and past experiences shape both lecturers and students' engagement online.

5.10 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, I recommended that the way lecturers perceive student engagement in online learning environments should be reconsidered. Engagement should be viewed as more than complying with instructions, but rather as a concept that includes emotional, cognitive, and student immediate environment (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004b; Fredricks, Filsecker & Lawson, 2016; Bond & Bedenlier, 2019). This calls for a shift from traditional, teacher-centred strategies to more student-centred approaches. Such a transition should also aim to encourage collaborative learning, moving from an authoritative hierarchy towards a more inclusive and free classroom culture. Furthermore, it is important to integrate strategies that specifically address emotional engagement. The emotional, social aspects of learning in online settings and the student's immediate environment are crucial. Creating a sense of community and belonging through anonymous engagement strategies and relevant tools can provide students with a safe space for expression and interaction, thereby enhancing participation. These strategies can be particularly beneficial for students who are hesitant to engage in more open settings. Additionally, online courses should be intentionally designed, putting the student at the centre, paying attention to their immediate environment that includes peers, technology, family, institution and curriculum.

Lastly, ongoing conversations on student engagement culture within the institution and professional development programmes for lecturers in this area are crucial. Faculties can also initiate some scholarly conversations of this nature. These ongoing conversations should focus on effective online teaching

strategies, especially those that manage student engagement and address the emotional needs of students in an online environment. By implementing these recommendations, lecturers can create more engaging, inclusive culture, and effective online student learning experiences.

5.11 Contribution of the study: What does this mean for how engagement is understood?

Upon reflecting on the findings and recommendations from the study through the lens of bioecological model of student engagement, student engagement must be understood as a cultural activity shaped by the systems and activities around it. The traditional view of engagement as compliance with instructions is now challenged, and a more comprehensive concept of engagement that takes into consideration emotional, cognitive, and student immediate environment is proposed. This implies that traditional, teacher-centred approaches are less effective in online settings, suggesting that a transition to more student-centred and inclusive strategies is necessary. The study emphasises the importance of affective engagement and the creation of a supportive online community, especially through anonymous strategies, highlighting the need for a deeper, more empathetic understanding of student well-being in digital learning spaces. In essence, the study calls for a holistic understanding of student engagement in online learning, focusing on affective, cognitive, and student immediate environment, while also promoting student-centred approaches, collaboration, and the creation of inclusive and engaging online learning experiences. This responsibility is a responsibility that must be shared amongst different stakeholders within an institution. The next section expands more on what this means for different stakeholders.

5.11.1 What does this mean for lecturers?

Firstly, it is important for lecturers to continuously focus on promoting student engagement in online learning environments. To achieve this, they need to intentionally design courses that take into consideration the factors that influence student engagement in the microsystem, which is the most immediate environment for students. As the institution aims to implement blended learning with a student-centred approach, lecturers should prioritise designing curricula that are engaging and put the student at the centre. They should make use of technologies that enable students to actively participate in learning activities. This means collecting as much data as possible from students before, during and after a course delivery.

Furthermore, as colleagues within the same institution, lecturers should engage in conversations that focus on student engagement and share their approaches and the technologies they use. They should plan more opportunities for student-student interactions that encourage collaboration and connectedness. Additionally, lecturers should acknowledge that students come from families and may face distractions while attending online classes from home. To minimise multitasking, anonymous engagement activities can be used to help students focus. Furthermore, lecturers together with academic developer practitioners, can consider providing guidelines for family members to support the student's learning from home, such as information on creating a conducive learning environment.

5.11.2 What does this mean for academic developers?

The institution has adopted blended learning with a focus on student-centredness. Academic developers such as Instructional Designers and Educational Technologists are the ones who support the implementation of blended learning. Their current role is to “conduct research on educational- and upcoming technologies in order to assist academic staff with developing and (re)designing courses for online platforms, as well as developing learning resources” (Walter Sisulu University, 2020). For them, this means they can engage in a reconceptualisation process with the bioecological model of student engagement, starting from the most immediate factors in the microsystem to the widest in the macrosystem. In aligning their roles with the bioecological model of student engagement, academic developers first need to understand engagement as a cultural activity embedded within the learning context. They should prioritise creating a culture of engagement by designing courses that recognise and value this context-sensitive approach. Their role should involve facilitating conversations about how context and culture impact student engagement and learning. To support this kind of engagement, they must equip courses with appropriate tools, emphasising anonymous engagement and collaboration to enhance all dimensions of student engagement. These tools should be user-friendly, accessible, and foster interactive learning experiences. Academic developers should collaborate closely with lecturers and, where possible, with students in the co-design of curricula, ensuring content is relevant, engaging, and accessible. Recognising the influence of students' family environments, they should also consider these factors at the microsystem level of their designs. This comprehensive approach will help create a more interactive, responsive, and culturally attuned learning environment.

5.11.3 What does this mean for people in management roles?

Within the institution, there are policies such as the policy on the infusion of technology in teaching and learning. Such policies aim to promote the integration of educational technologies in learning and teaching through a variety of modes, pedagogical approaches, technologies, and the Learning Management System (LMS). For people in leadership roles who either develop, revise or interpret policies in their faculties and departments, this means they should develop future policies with a holistic understanding of the complex systems that interact to influence student engagement. Such policies should establish a framework that encourages the implementation of student-centred learning approaches. The future policies should support continuous professional development and ongoing conversations among a multi-stakeholder group of lecturers and academic developers on revising pedagogical approaches. Guidelines that facilitate the support of students' learning environments at home can also be developed by people in management roles in collaboration with lecturers and academic developers to aim for conducive learning environments.

5.12 Future work

It would be recommended that future academic research take a broader approach that covers all faculties. This will help researchers to have a more comprehensive understanding of diverse academic environments and how they function. One of the key areas of interest could be investigating the impact of a lecturer's voice on the exosystem and macrosystem levels of influence within educational institutions. Another critical focus could be on lecturers' role in shaping the macrosystem, especially in terms of influencing broader educational policies and cultural shifts.

It would be interesting to explore whether ongoing discussions among lecturers and academic developers about the culture of student engagement at the microsystem level can lead to transformative changes at the macrosystem level. This kind of research could provide valuable insights into the capacity of microsystem-level changes to inform and reform practices and policies at the larger macrosystem level. Ultimately, a holistic examination of various systems within the realm of student engagement in higher education would offer a deeper understanding of their interconnectedness.

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Appendix A: Consent form

Consent form

Appendix A: Consent Form

Project Title: Lecturers' perceptions on enhancing student engagement through anonymous online engagement strategies

Researcher: Lungile Mdanyana

I volunteer to participate in this research project conducted by Lungile Mdanyana for his studies at the School of Education at the University of Cape Town. I am fully aware that this research project is conducted for the purpose of studying lecturers' experiences on pedagogic strategies that are aimed at enhancing student engagement online.

As a lecturer at Walter Sisulu University, I understand that I am being invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. I understand that in agreeing to participate:

- My participation is voluntary and as such, I have a choice to pull out at any point before the field work is concluded, I also understand that there won't be any form of remuneration for participating in this project.
- The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes to complete.
- Notes will be written during the interview and/or a session recording. I can decline to be recorded.
- I understand that if I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview I have the right to decline to answer any questions or to leave the interview session.
- I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using the information obtained from the interview. My confidentiality as a participant will remain secure. Subsequent uses of recordings and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.

- Support staff and academic lecturers at Walter Sisulu University will neither be present during the interview nor have access to interview notes or transcripts of the interview. This precaution will prevent any of the findings from having personal negative repercussions for me.
- If I choose to be interviewed, I have the right to view and comment on the transcribed interview data before the findings are analyzed.
- I have read and understood the participant information sheet provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
- I have been given a copy of this consent form.

I hereby agree / disagree (Mark with an X the applicable option) to participate in the **interview** for this study.

I hereby agree / disagree (Mark with an X the applicable option) to the **audio recording of my interview** for this study.

Name _____

Signed _____

Date _____

Appendix B: Information sheet

Appendix B: Information sheet

Research Title: Lecturers' perceptions on enhancing student engagement through anonymous online engagement strategies

Dear Lecturer/Participant

This research project is aimed at investigating the perspectives of lecturers on online student engagement. In order to achieve the aims of the research, I intend to do this investigation at WSU particularly in the Department of Management and Governance because this department is currently participating in the blended learning teaching modality and have experiences in interacting with students online in both synchronous and asynchronous learning activities. This study attempts to understand the lecturer's experiences and pedagogical strategies currently adopted to enhance student engagement in an online environment in support of blended learning within the institution. The study seeks to understand and search for current ways that improve student engagement in an online environment. The study also explores the adoption of anonymous engagement strategies in trying to enhance student engagement and then report on the effectiveness of such strategy. This strategy is introduced through an intervention workshop to all the participants.

The data collection methods in this research include an interview, which will be done through Zoom. In order to capture our full discussion, I will kindly ask for permission to record our interview sessions. Only you, I and the supervisor shall have access to the recordings. All data obtained from both interviews will be treated with confidentiality, and anonymity throughout the study period and beyond. Data will be destroyed after 5 years as per UCT Data Management guidelines.

Participation in this study is voluntary and as such, participants have the right to withdraw from the research at any stage without having a fear of facing any penalty. Throughout the study, the researcher has the responsibility of keeping participant's identities anonymous. When reporting on the research outputs (thesis, academic papers, etc.), I shall not be using any of the participants' names; I shall endeavour to protect your identities. The interview will approximately take 45-60 minutes.

There is an intervention workshop that is planned for a total of six hours. The workshop is planned to be conducted online for a period of six hours over two days. The workshop title is “Anonymisation as the strategy to enhance student engagement”.

If you require any additional information concerning this project, please do not hesitate to mention it at any stage during the research. My contact details are as follow:

Name: Lungile Mdanyana

Cell no: 067 417 0551/ 073 146 8508

E-mail: lmdanyana@wsu.ac.za

Appendix C: Guiding questions to semi-structured interviews

1. How do you understand student engagement and what does it mean for you?

2. Are you currently participating in online teaching?
3. If you would describe your classroom to someone who has never been to your class, what would you tell them?
4. Do you think students feel safe to engage in your courses?
5. Are opportunities for students to interact with other students available and encouraged? How have you achieved that? Give some examples
6. Do you provide opportunities for students to meet virtually, and informally to build a sense of community and belonging amongst themselves?
7. Are there opportunities where students can contact the lecturer about questions they have about your course/ support they need using different platforms?
8. How do you refer to students in activities? Do you refer to them by names?
9. How often do you send announcements to students on the LMS, emails or social media?
10. Do you use features such as chat, and emojis to interact with your students in live sessions?
11. What is your experience with screen sharing during live online sessions? Is the content shared in a font size and colour that is easily seen by students? Is the content shared also uploaded on the LMS to be accessed by students any time and anywhere?
12. Do students search for course-relevant material such as articles and share it with class members?

13. What barriers or limitations do you normally face when it comes to online student engagement practices?
14. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Appendix D: Ethical Clearance

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Dr Carolyn McKinney
Associate Professor

University of Cape Town, Private Bag X3, Rondebosch, 7701
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EDNREC20220711

21 July 2022

Lungile Kenny Mdanyana

M.Ed

Dear Mr Mdanyana,

Re: Ethical Clearance for Research Project

I am pleased to inform you that ethical clearance has been granted by the School of Education Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities for your research project entitled: Lecturers' perceptions on enhancing student engagement through anonymous online engagement strategies.

I wish you all the best with your study.

Yours sincerely,

Signed by candidate

Associate Professor Carolyn McKinney
Chair - School of Education Research Ethics Committee

Appendix E: Gate keeper's letter

DIVISION OF ACADEMIC AFFAIRS AND RESEARCH
DIRECTORATE OF RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

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27 July 2022

Mr Lungile Mdanyana
Directorate of Learning and Teaching
Walter Sisulu University
Butterworth
4950

Dear Mr Mdanyana

Gatekeepers Permission Letter to conduct research at Walter Sisulu University

Reference Number: S21/12/259 (PhD)
Institution: Walter Sisulu University

A Gatekeeper Letter is hereby granted for the study "**Lecturers' perceptions on enhancing student engagement through anonymous online engagement strategies**" provided that copies of your completed study will be submitted to the Campus Rector of the campus in which the study will be conducted and the Directorate of the Research & Innovation.

All data pertaining to Walter Sisulu University will be treated confidentially and you are required to abide by ethical principles at all times. It is your responsibility to seek consent from Participants.

Kind regards

Directorate Research Development

Signed by candidate

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PRIVATE BAG X1 MTHATHA 5117
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TEL +27 502 2147 FAX +27 502 2185

Prof W Akpan
Senior Director: Research & Innovation

Appendix F: Intervention workshop full details

Training plan for intervention workshop: Engaging students through anonymous engagement strategies

Context

Topic: Online Student Engagement Strategies

Total learning time: 2 hours

Designed learning time: 2 hours

Size of class: 25

Description: This workshop focused on engaging students online through different strategies. Workshop design included Polls as strategies to engage students. WordCloud activities as a way to engage students as they co-create. Anonymous open ended questions for discussions. Tools used were padlet, polls on teams and mentimeter.

Mode of delivery was fully online

Aims

The main aim of the workshop was to introduce anonymous engagement strategies and invite lecturers to apply it to a context they teach in.

Outcomes

Knowledge: By the end of the workshop, lecturers explored the student engagement through the Moore's Interaction Framework, Dimensions of student engagement and Bioecological model of student engagement.

Application: By the end of the workshop, lecturers applied the anonymous engagement strategies to their context.

Analysis: By the end of the workshop, lecturers were able to analyse their context in the light of the More's Interaction Framework and identify opportunities to create student engagement online.

Teaching-Learning activities

Introduction to Moore's Interaction Framework as a theory that underpins interactions in teaching and learning practices. Introduction to student engagement dimensions and anonymous engagement strategies

Produce	*5 minutes*	*1 Student*	*Teacher present*	*Online*

how are you feeling today? Participants participated on this check-in activity. They were expected to follow activity instructions. A link was shared on the chat area and this was a word cloud activity.

Discuss *8 minutes* *1 Student* *Teacher present* *Online*

Participants participated on the discussion forum and post open ended questions on the activity about how they define student engagement .

Read Watch Listen *7 minutes* *1 Student* *Teacher present* *Online*

In teams, the instructor shared the slides and introduce the student engagement in online context based on Moore's Interaction Framework, Dimensions of student engagement and Bioecological model of student engagement.

Investigate *8 minutes* *1 Student* *Teacher present* *Online*

Participants searched online for student engagement dimensions. They briefly read about the dimensions as they prepare to participate on the next activity.

Collaborate *7 minutes* *25 Students* *Teacher present* *Online*

Participants participated in the student engagement dimensions activity. They participated in the ranking activity where they were expected to vote for the most applied dimension in their current courses.

Linked resources

Ranking Activity

Collaborate *7 minutes* *25 Students* *Teacher present* *Online*

Participants participated on the pin image activity where they were expected to pin the dimension they need to improve the most.

Linked resources

Pin Image Activity

Discuss *8 minutes* *4 Students* *Teacher present* *Online*

Participants went into breakaway sessions and reflected on student engagement activities covered.

Collaborate *5 minutes* *25 Students* *Teacher present* *Online*

Vote on a Poll

Lecturers creating anonymous engagement strategies

Produce *10 minutes* *4 Students* *Teacher present* *Online*

Participants were given an opportunity to create a word cloud activity and share their links on the chat.

Produce *10 minutes* *1 Student* *Teacher present* *Online*

Participants were given an opportunity to create an open ended discussion questions for students to participate anonymously

Produce *12 minutes* *1 Student* *Teacher present* *Online*

Participants were given an opportunity to install the poll tool on their Ms Teams app and then create a poll, share the poll on the screen and a link on the chat and all the other members become participants in the poll

Discuss *10 minutes* *4 Students* *Teacher present* *Online*

Participants to shared their views on how these strategies can be implemented in their courses

Q&A *18 minutes* *1 Student* *Teacher present* *Online*

Participants were given an opportunity to ask questions and the instructor to reply

Read Watch Listen *5 minutes* *1 Student* *Teacher present* *Online*

HOD did a vote of thanks

Representations of the learning experience

Learning through	minutes	%	
	Acquisition (Read, Watch, Listen)	12	10
	Investigation	8	7
	Discussion	26	22
	Practice	18	15
	Collaboration	19	16
	Production	37	31

	minutes	%	
	Whole class	19	16
	Group	28	23
	Individual	73	61

	minutes	%	
	Face to face (not online)	0	0
	Online	120	100

	minutes	%	
	Teacher present	120	100
	Teacher not present	0	0