# Engagement with and Participation in Online role play Collaborative Arguments: A Sociocultural Perspective

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**Abstract:** Digitally mediated role plays indicate potential for collaboration, social exchange of information and knowledge as well as motivation for learning beyond classroom time. These elements are critical for ESL learners' development of language and argumentative writing practices. The aim of this research project was to investigate how students' engagement with and participation in online role play collaborative arguments shaped their literacy practices, and influenced their beliefs and thinking regarding particular societal issue. This qualitative research project based on a larger ethnographic case study and tools of action research investigated students' interactions and experiences before, during and after the online role play. The study involved 20 ESL pre-service students at one university in Uganda and was conducted in both the real and online spaces. The real space involved face-to-face sessions aimed at building students' confidence in using blogs for online role play. While the online space involved non-participant observations to gain understanding of the social dynamics of students' engagement in online role play, and the opportunities for students to engage in literacy practices related to online argumentative compositions. The study findings indicated that engagement in online role play using blog platform provided a rich environment for learners to exercise their creativity, orchestrate multiple ways of meaning-making and build tactical relations for purposes of collective action. Furthermore, the use of online role play collaborative arguments facilitated a shift from "ascribed" to "achieved" identities where students did not only become aware that they were dealing with issues larger than individual perspectives, associated with school, family, culture and the legal system, but also that there need for them to take part in the civic action.

**Keywords:** Online role play; participation; literacy practices; discourses; student engagement; collaborative arguments; pre-service students

## 1. Introduction

Students' ability to form arguments aimed at convincing others about the validity of their position is one of the important literacy practices. However, this does not only involve formulating convincing arguments, providing supporting evidence and challenging weaknesses in an opponent's argument. It "also ultimately involves convincing others to agree that problems are worth addressing leading to change through collaborative actions" (Beach and Doerr-Stevens 2011, pp.185). The traditional argumentative writing pedagogies in many educational contexts often focus on competitive approaches that reify individualistic perspectives of arguments, rather than collaborative ones. This implies that educators have to rethink their teaching and learning approaches "well beyond the traditional argumentative models" (Kong et al., 2014.pp 71). Supporting students to engage in online role play collaborative arguments is a promising alternative.

Thomas (2007, p.2) defines online role play as an "asynchronous text-based world" as it exists as a non-physical realm that relies on written character dialogues, and descriptions of physical traits, actions and behaviours (Haynes-Moore, 2015). Role play activities encourage participants to step into someone else's shoes and also facilitate exploration of issues or behaviours within new contexts (Russell and Shepherd, 2010). For role plays to take place, participants adopt different roles through which they express varying viewpoints regarding an issue, for purposes of convincing an audience. Being online, participants are afforded a shared space to deliberate on the various positions presented in order to arrive at a common understanding.

Research has proved the potential for online role plays in language learning to expand opportunities for communicative competencies, especially argument-related ones (Beach and Doerr-Stevens, 2013; Haynes-Moore, 2015; Azman and Dollsaid, 2018). In contexts where English is used a medium of communication, it is generally assumed that learners are naturally able to 'pick up' the language skills, especially the argumentative writing skills. This belief tends to confine many ESL educators to a top-down transmission model of argumentation where learners are modelled to formulate arguments and provide supporting evidence to

convince their educators who are the primary audience. However, such models have proved habitually disengaging to the learners and lack context for collaborative communication needed for effective arguments (Beach and Doerr-Stevens, 2011). However, adopting digitally-supported online role plays can be one way to assist learners to develop social skills, leading to a better understanding of practices related to argumentation. According to Kongmee et al., (2011) online role plays affords players a space to interact and exchange information geared towards achieving meaningful goals.

In the current study, a blog-mediated role play was introduced in English as Second Language (ESL) methods class at one university in Uganda with third year, pre-service students as participants. The aim was to understand those specific literacy practices pre-service students exhibit during online role play engagement. That is, how do those literacy practices look like when digital tools are used, what are their properties and how those enacted practices contribute to students' learning and thinking abilities. This would be beneficial for educators, (especially in technologically emerging pedagogical contexts) looking for ways to incorporate literacies associated with use of digital tools into students' writing activities that are creating opportunities for mediating creativity and agency within the sociocultural realm of language learning. This would also help to reduce the monologic nature of argumentative writing that is characteristic of autonomous-based classrooms, by providing space for students to experiment with new ways of meaning-making. Since this was the first time students were using the blog platform for online role plays, they were exposed to several "scaffold learning activities" so as to "gain explicit information" (New London Group, 1996, p. 86) pertaining to digitally-mediated role plays. The activities included; creating blog entries, building online role play personas, crafting on-screen arguments and manipulation of visual resources. Thus, the project sought to answer two questions; first, what literacy practices do ESL pre-service students engaged in online role play collaborative arguments enact? Secondly, how do the literacy practices enacted through engagement in online role play influence ESL pre-service students' argumentative thinking and civic action?

## 2. Background

Research indicates that using digital tools for online role-plays and debates has potential to transform the teaching and learning of argumentative writing. Kongmee et al. (2011, pp.1) argue that online role plays "require players not only to complete a variety of tasks and develop their characters individually, but also to participate in teams or guilds to accomplish specific missions". Online role plays perform an important role in creating simulated spaces that "allow for students to take an active role and learn by doing, which is a principal tenet of social cognitive theory" (Bryant 2006, p.3). Additionally, digitally mediated online role plays present "relaxed, accessible, friendly and comfortable environment that promote collaboration, social exchange of knowledge which increase students' motivation and engagement for learning outside normal classroom hours (Thalluli and Penman 2015, p. 455).

Engagement in an online role plays requires that learners are adequately prepared to respond to the demands of working with online tools, while at the same time pay attention to in-game dynamics such as; interacting online, setting of goals, exchanging of ideas, and consolidating role play positions to achieve the set goals. Kongmee et al., (2011, p.1) posit that the online game genre facilitates social constructivist approaches to learning where students engage in open dialogues and collaborative construction of knowledge. In addition, this genre provides enhanced opportunities for collective intelligence, problem solving, strategic thinking, imaginative and interpretive play (Thalluli and Penman (2015) and also affords multiple audiences that provide richer contexts for exchange of ideas, perspective-taking and collegial support (Wodzichi, Schwammlien and Moskaliuk 2012).

The past two decades have indicated a steady increase of empirical studies to demonstrate that the 'participatory', 'collaborative' and distributed' affordances associated with digital technologies have potential to support ESL/EFL learners' development of literacy skills, as opposed to the 'individuated' and 'author-centric' affordances of the traditional print-based pedagogies (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006; Beach and Doerr-Stevens 2009; 2011; 2013; Gee 2012; Zhang and Kaufman, 2015; Hong et al., 2016; Zhang, 2017; Azman and Dollsaid 2018). However, many of the studies were conducted in contexts with relatively higher uptake of adoption and use of digital technologies for academic purposes as compared to many African contexts, Uganda inclusive, where uptake is still emerging (Early and Tembe,2010; Veletsianos, 2010; Gachago, et al., 2013). There was need for similar research to be conducted in the emergent contexts in order to contribute to the global digital literacy debates. Veletsianos (2010) and Gachago et al. (2013) suggest that digital innovations ought to be considered

as 'placed resources', implying that any technology when adopted, takes on new contextual meanings and influences varying literacy practices, particularly in socially distinctive African contexts. Premised on the 'ideological' tenet that 'text' is not only print-based, but also a manipulation of other semiotic resources, as well as insights from the sociocultural theoretical frame (Vygotsky, 1978; Street, 1994) which consider literacy as a social practice that must to be understood within the realm of the larger social, cultural and historical processes. The study aimed to understand how engagement in blog-mediated role play fosters ESL pre-service students' enactment of literacy practices and contributed to their argumentative thinking and motivation for civic action. Thus, this research makes a case that literacy is promoted or constrained depending on the conditioned learners are subjected to and these can be best understood through literacy as a social practice that considers learners' multiliteracies as they negotiate meanings across sites of learning.

## 3. Literature review

### 3.1 Traditional argumentative writing versus collaborative argumentative writing

The traditional view to argumentative writing positions students to demonstrate knowledge primarily for their teachers. Beach and Doerr-Stevens (2011: 166) argue that students do not necessarily formulate arguments to convince their peers or wider audiences. Instead, "they make claims and provide justifications for those claims without consideration for potential audiences' counter-arguments". Such argumentative practices often occur in a "rhetorical vacuum"- often removed from students' use of arguments in everyday conversations in which they are more likely to employ counter-claims and rebuttals leading to addressing their everyday life problems (Beach and Doerr-Stevens 2009). On the other hand, collaborative arguments entail creation of authentic rhetorical contexts with multiple audiences in which participants exchange ideas, weigh the merits of competing positions, refute arguments and move towards some recommended synthesis (Beach and Doerr-Stevens 2011).This illuminates the importance of having an audience larger than just the teacher to motivate students to engage in argumentative practices. Midgette, Haria and MacArthur (2008) confirm that students are more likely to engage in counter-arguments and rebuttals if they have a specific purpose and audience for their written arguments.

Secondly, with traditional argumentative writing practices, students have limited conviction about the stances they adopt for their arguments which often leads to information telling. Besides, these practices encourage confrontational approaches that reify individualistic perspectives mainly aimed at defeating opponents or wining debates (Beach and Doerr-Stevens, 2009). In contrast, collaborative argumentative learning environments foster students to respect their opponents as potential sources of useful information. Collaborative arguments also involve embracing tentative or exploratory positions regarding "passing theories"- hunches, opinions, or hypotheses that need further testing (Beach and Doerr-Stevens, 2009). By adopting these "passing theories", students learn to accommodate differing opinions and counter-arguments from their peers for purposes of obtaining "constructive controversy"- a process of exploring alternative perspectives on a problem with an intention of collaboratively generating a solution to that problem (Johnson and Johnson, 2009). Research has proved the potential of digitally-mediated role plays to transform traditional argumentative writing practices into collaborative ones (Peterson, 2016; Azman and Dollsaid, 2018). Given the increasing popularity of online games for academic purposes, the current study examined to examine how participation in blog-mediated role play fostered students' engagement in literacy and argumentative thinking practices.

### 3.2 Using digital platforms for online role play collaborative arguments

Using blogs or social networking platforms for online collaborative arguments provides opportunities for engagement in "mass interpersonal persuasion" Oinas-Kukkonen et al. (2008, pp. 26) where students learn to persuade both the familiar and non-familiar audiences for purposes of problem-solving. This practice is referred to as "rhetoric of significance and transformation" (Beach and Doerr-Stevens, 2009, pp 460), whereby students are motivated to debate and gather evidence to disprove a policy or status quo if it directly affects them.

Additionally, digitally-mediated online role plays provide students with ample time and space to engage in argumentative thinking. Contrary to the superficial, in-class role plays and debates, online role plays create opportunities for ongoing conversations, where students post their stances, and reflect on them for purposes of building a common understanding. The time and space affordances of digitally-mediated role play arguments are critical in fostering argumentative practices. This is because reflecting on the various view points, identifying contradictions, revising positions and building consensus regarding an issue requires time, which is never available in the face-to-face role plays. Moreover, many students in today's classrooms belong to the net-

generation (Prensky, 2001.pp 1) whose livelihood depends on digital technology for socialization, entertainment and information. Implying that there is need to adopt pedagogies that are consistent with contemporary learners' interests and needs (Najjemba, Cronje and Kafui, 2018).

### 3.3 The sociocultural theoretical conceptions on literacy

The sociocultural theoretical conceptions of literacy consider literacy as a social practice which is related to historical, sociocultural and political contexts (New London Group, 1994). People engage with literacy depending on the purpose, the medium and the audience for the particular communicative event. According to Gee (1994, pp.vii) language "always comes fully attached to 'other stuff'; to social relations, cultural models, power and politics, perspectives on experience, values and attitudes, as well as things and places in the world." Thus, literacy as component of language reflects all this "other stuff" (Perry 2012, pp.52). This suggests that making arguments as a literacy practice anchors within the larger contextual frames of institutional influences, cultural beliefs and attitudes. It is through the interface with the social context that contextually dependent meanings are shaped (Perry 2012). Therefore, social contexts are critical in shaping argumentative practices during online role plays engagements.

For purpose of this paper, literacy is viewed as a socially situated practice that is conceptualized as "a concrete human activity that involves what people do with literacy, the associations they have with it, how they construct its value and the ideologies that surround it." (Baynham and Prinsloo 2009). It can be inferred that what is regarded as literacy will depend on the purpose it intends to serve, discourses the people involved in, the social, cultural and political influencing those discourses. As such, literacy as social practice is based on the assumption that how we value and use literacy depends on the broader social and cultural meanings, values and representations (Barton and Hamilton, 1998). Therefore, from this perspective, the study aimed to address two research questions;

1. What literacy practices do pre-service students engaged in online role play collaborative arguments enact?
2. How do the literacy practices enacted through engagement in online role play influence pre-service students' argumentative thinking and civic action?

## 4. Research methods

This interventional study was conducted with 20 ESL pre-service students in one university in Uganda. It employed tools of action research to investigate students' literacy practices, experiences and argumentative skills through their participation and engagement in digitally-mediated role play. Interviews and workshops were conducted to establish students' skills of digitally-mediated role plays and knowledge about collaborative arguments, in order to provide the necessary overt instruction (NLG, 1996, p.86) for effective participation in the role play debate. Additionally, a virtual ethnographic approach was applied to understand students' routine in the assigned roles, the in-game social dynamics, and the social, cultural beliefs, and values assimilated in building role play positions.

The blog was chosen because it is a tool that was specifically designed for writing purposes and its affordances such as embedding of images within texts would support 'textual hybridity' needed to create an 'on-screen visual character' and produce layers of information that make meaning-making a process of navigation and choice (Jewitt, 2009). Moreover, the conversations and interactions afforded by the blog tool could easily mediate online role play collaborative arguments focussed on in the current study. Thus, a fictitious virtual high school "Sparkle High School" was created, in which students were invited to adopt different roles to debate upon a unanimously agreed upon topic. The blog home page contained instructions on how the role play was to be conducted out, as shown in figure1.

**SPARKLE HIGH SCHOOL**

In this virtual high school, 'Sparkle High School', you will play roles of some of the selected characters to research, discuss and debate about the schools' mobile phone policy and access to students' personal information. In your roles you are required to post a comment explaining the position you are taking on the issue and also give supporting evidence. Thereafter, other characters will come in to post comments on whether they agree or disagree with your position.

Home

THURSDAY, 26 APRIL 2018

Mr.Amanya Wycliff

Hello, I am Amanya Wycliff, the Head teacher Sparkle High School. Our school has kept a wonderful reputation in terms of discipline and academic excellence. I would not want it to be ruined because of a couple of students' bad behavior. At Sparkle High School, we take the safety and well being of our students seriously. I believe that as the school administration, we have a moral obligation to intervene when students misbehave. The recent scandal involving our students drinking alcohol, smocking Shisha, indulging in Casual sex, is rather unfortunate and I

BLOG ARCHIVE
▼ 2018 (16)
  ► May (1)
  ▼ April (15)
    Mr.Amanya Wycliff
    Joy Teka
    Conie Were
    Laura Kaye
    Anita Bakka
    Mrs Yogi Ayendale
    Langa Lagu
    Ella Ialoyo
    Willy Gadama
    Frank Mavido
    Trudy Bandana

**Figure 1:** Blog home page containing a Virtual high school

## 4.1 Action research method (workshops and interviews)

As earlier stated, action research involving workshops and brief interviews were initially conducted to establish participants' knowledge and skills of online role plays, and to provide the necessary support to boost their performance in the online role play. During the interviews, it was established that participants were more familiar with using the blog platform for personal reflective writing purposes as opposed to online role play collaborative arguments. The students were also more exposed to face-to-face role plays and print-based argumentative texts than blog-mediated role play collaborative arguments. As such, the initial workshops (the first and second one) were conducted to boost students' confidence in using the blog platform for online role play. Moreover, online role play collaborative arguments require students to take up different roles and formulate arguments on a topic which they share on the blog platform in form of blog entries. It is these postings that are either challenged or affirmed by other role players leading to a continuous process of meaning-making and knowledge building. In order to give adequate support and tackle any challenges that would arise during the course of the study, workshops were organised on a weekly basis. In these workshops, demos of how to sign into the blog platform, create blog entries, and upload them were conducted. Similarly, discussions of making good arguments, counter-arguments, claims and rebuttals were held.

In the subsequent workshop, students were requested to select a topic that they would like to debate upon in their online role play, citing reasons why they wished to engage with those particular topics. Participants took several hours debating upon various topics, but did not reach a consensus as to which topic they should focus on. Finally, one of the participants suggested a topic regarding mobile technology restrictions in schools to which majority of the participants agreed to focus on. The students cited many instances in which they thought such policies should not continue to apply is schools. Thereafter, the students adopted different roles, ranging from school headmaster, counsellors, teachers, parents, students' representatives, lawyers, child rights activists, religious leaders, among others.

In the fourth and fifth workshops, participants were requested to conduct research and critique the existing mobile phone policies in high school, citing evidence in which these policies did or did not issues of school discipline, children's safety and well-being. Students were encouraged to read the constitution and policy documents regarding the use of technology among young people and share their findings in the workshop discussions. Additionally, students composed argumentative texts with varying positions and stances on the issue. Some participants wrote the texts using the conventional pen and paper tools, while others used their laptops and desktop computers available in the computer laboratory where workshops were held. Thereafter, students shared their drafts with peers and educator for feedback, and continued to make revisions to their

drafts basing on the feedback offered. The final workshop was devoted to making final touches to the students' texts and to ensure that the semiotic resources employed were are well orchestrated to serve the intended purposes.

A virtual ethnographic approach was used to understand students' online role play activities and literacy practices as they unfolded on the blog platform. According to Misuishi (2006) online ethnographic approach allows for use of an extensive range of data collection tools including observation, note-taking and interactive communication through texts. As such students' reflective journal responses were analysed and group interviews conducted with the students at the end of the role play to understand their experiences of participating in online role play.

## 5. Findings and discussion

This study aimed to examine the literacy practices pre-service students in an ESL Methods class enacted through their engagement in online role play collaborative arguments and also to establish how the literacy practices enacted by students' participation in online role play contributed to shaping their argumentative thinking and civic action. Data showed that blog-mediated role play not only provide a rich environment for students to enact a range of literacy practices ranging from building credible role play personas, adopting competing discourses, building strategic relationships, but also created a space for broadening their argumentative thinking and engagement in civic action.

### 5.1 Building of credible role play personas

Data revealed that pre-service students used their prior knowledge of social media engagement; building profiles and uploading images to create what Beach and Doerr-Stevens (2013) refer to as "rhetorical persona who serves to achieve own rhetorical goals of convincing others to adopt their positions". For example, in figure 1, a student who created the role of the school head teacher named as Amanya Wycliff (pseudonym), embedded an image of a well-dressed, neatly kept man with an imposing personality. This served to project a symbol of authority and a strict disciplinarian expected to instil discipline among students, through controlling their activities within the school. Through employing this image, the student is able to project an image of a non-compromising character in executing his duties as school administrator. Rogers et al., (2010) posit that meanings are not just words combined with images. Rather, word-meanings are modified in the context of image-meanings, thus opening up a wider space for meaning-making.

The student further aligns the image of a strict, non- compromising leader to the position he undertakes which served not only to build ethos but also create credibility of the character. His assertion "I believe as the school administration, we have a moral authority to intervene when students misbehave….." positions him as a person who has high stakes in controlling students' activities, which therefore allows him to defend the action taken. He further explains that uncontrolled phone use during school time and other distractions such as alcohol and substance abuse, as was discovered during execution of the school policies, are forbidden activities regardless of where they take place. The school has the mandate to guard against any destructive behaviour among the students in order to promote what they refer to as "valued learning". The school's belief in 'valued learning' largely involves a school environment that is free from distractions that may divert children's attention from learning. While this position aroused a lot of controversy among other role players, it depicts the school administrator as the voice of the institutional ideologies regarding discipline and preservation of school values.

These findings closely align with the notion of 'figured worlds as socially and culturally constructed sites' (Holland et al., 1998). The student who created this persona continuously re-aligned the character's actions and intentions within lived-world hierarchies and power structures of the 'figured world'. According to Holland et al., (1998, p.52) 'figured worlds' are socially and culturally constructed sites in which particular actors continuously perform and realign their identities in an improvised response to others and in response to the social relationships within the figured world. It was evident that students had learnt the socially recognized ways of using words and other semiotic codes (e.g. images), combined with ways of "thinking, feeling, believing and acting" (Gee, 2005), to qualify their characters as members of particular social groups and also build ethos aimed at convincing audiences to identify with their cause. Such literacy practices not only strengthened students' on-screen visual arguments, but also helped students to shift from what Gee (2005, pp.111-112) describes as "ascribed" identities – superficial identities within the role play to "achieved" identities- those identities within

lived-world spaces of the school or community. Similarly, students adopted competing discourses to challenge identities and positions projected above.

## 5.2 Using competing discourses to challenge other role play persona positions

Analysis was based on the sociocultural theoretical perspective which focuses on the "ideological" as opposed to the "autonomous" view of literacy (Street, 1994; Gee, 2005). The ideological view considers literacy practices from the perspective of cultural and power structures in society, while the autonomous view considers literacy in terms of universal cognitive or technical skills that can be learned independently of the specific contexts or cultural frameworks (Street, 1994). In this context, data revealed that engagement in online role play collaborative arguments fostered students' use of competing discourses basing on professional, administrative, legal, family and ideological ways of knowing and thinking (Gee, 2005) to challenge each other's positions. Students exhibited awareness of the rules, and beliefs operating in the different systems such as the law, school, family and technology. The student who played the role of a head teacher built his position basing on the discourse of school management and protectionism to frame his position based in the power to protect the school image and ensure children's well-being. While this discourse garnered support from a several characters including; Joy Teka, the school counsellor, Connie Were, the concerned parent, and Laura Kaye, the school nurse, it also provoked a lot of controversy among other characters especially, Willy Gadama, the single parent, Cissy Loyoka, the legal representative and Yogi Ayendale, the Child Rights Activist (Character names are pseudonyms and the competing discourses can be accessed on http://ele3101collaborativewriting.blogspot.com/2018/04/.

On the contrary, Cissy Loyoka, the legal representative used a legal discourse to challenge the school management position. He explains that the school's policy which restricts students from using their mobile devices during school time and subsequent retributive acts such as confiscating student's phones and searching through their social media pages for incriminating information, is not only a violation students' privacy, but also a deprivation of students' constitutional freedoms to enjoy technology. He adds that basing on an 'illegally' obtained video recording (of children drinking alcohol and abusing substances) - an event that happened outside the school premises, to dismiss students, puts the school in a volatile and contestable position. He states;

> *While the school management may feel justified to get rid of the unruly students as guided by the school regulations. This case can turn out to be much more complicated due to the fact that the basis of the expulsion was focused on what the students did outside the school premises. While it might be clearly stipulated in the school regulations that phones are forbidden, but these rules do not protect the teacher who intrudes on the learners' online space and interactions with others.*

The student who crafted this character was aware of the beliefs and rules governing the legal system which he used to build a valid legal interpretation of school administrators' actions. By identifying a weak spot in the policy, not only indicated the student's critical thinking abilities, but also it reflected a real-life court scenario that could be used by lawyers in real-life courtrooms. Moreover, discourse like that illuminates an allegiance to a legal system, (directly opposed to a school system), whose values are purposely geared towards upholding the children's legal rights.

The school counsellor, on the other hand, uses a psycho-social discourse to defend the actions of the school administrators. She argues that children in the adolescence phase experience serious behavioural challenges which render them incapable of making proper judgement about their life. Therefore, this calls for adults to guide and control their behaviour, even if it means over-stepping boundaries, as the case was with the school administrators searching through the students' private' social media pages. "Otherwise, how else would the administrators know that the children were engaged in self-destructive behaviour…?" The discourses of protectionism and control adopted by the school head teacher, and all other like-minded roles reflect an allegiance to school system with an ideological belief that to achieve 'value in learning', there must be strict control of students' activities and provision of a distraction-free and safe school environment for all.

The single parent (Gadama) also challenged the school policy and the belief in 'valued learning' using a family discourse. He highlights inconsistencies in the school's banning of children's use of mobile devices during school time, while at the same time insisting on their belief in 'valued learning' and student's 'well-being'. He argued that being a single parent, who is always away on business trips; he ensures the well-being of his children through constant calls via technology-enabled devices. He then wonders how the school expects him to fulfil his parental obligations with the ban on mobile phones;

*How does the school expect me to fulfil my parental obligation – which by the way is part of ensuring the well-being of my children- when my children are not allowed to carry their phones or mobile devices at school? Does the school think that by cutting off my children's communication is ensuring children's well- being?"*

Gadama's argument is that banning the use of mobile phones during school hours cannot guarantee students' well-being or learning, because it creates unnecessary inconveniences and anxieties which may hinder children's well-being and learning, for that matter. Thus, student uses family and the dynamics of contemporary society discourse to make valid arguments as to why the status quo phones policies can no longer work. The legal representative, on the other hand, uses the legal discourse to portray the flaws in the same policies.

By voicing these competing discourses, the students (behind these characters), engaged in what Kamberelis (2001, p.120) referred to as 'hybrid discourse practice'. The practice involves illustrating the competing agendas associated with larger complex institutional forces related the legal, school, family and technology-oriented systems, which according to Engestrom (2005) create tensions and contradictions suggesting a need for change in the status quo. By experimenting with the various discourses associated with the different systems, students became aware that they were not simply dealing with individual perspectives, but with larger societal issues (Beach and Doerr-Stevens, 2013, p.193), which positioned them to find ways, such as collaborative building of coalitions in order to arrive at possible solutions.

## 5.3 Strategic online interactions and coalition building

Previous research indicated that students' blog and social media interactions have limited educational value, except fostering social relationships (Hew 2011; Wise, Skues and Williams 2011; Hew and Cheung, 2012). However, current study revealed that students were using knowledge of their interactions on these platforms, such as, exchange views and opinions about current events or personal lives and drawing on each other's ideas to build arguments, to build alliances for purposes of boosting their positions and enacting civic action. Beach and Doerr-Stevens (2013, p.188) supports this view that "students' interactions on blogs and social media platforms involve more than simply social interactions. Students can and do use the writings on these sites to engage in argumentative thinking". For example, through the 'comment' function students engaged in asynchronous conversations in which they exchanged ideas and planned strategies intended to build a common understanding on why mobile phone policies were no longer applicable. For example some students planned to use story-telling as one of the strategies to get their message across.

The student who created Ella Laloyo (teenage girl who got pregnant while still in school) and Langa Lagu (a teenager boy who dropped out of school due of drug addiction) through the narrative technique delivered a message that adolescence challenges require a different handling approach as opposed to the dismissal policies in schools (narratives can be accessed at http://ele3101collaborativewriting.blogspot.com/2018/04/). Through narratives students told real life stories of adolescents to serve as testimony that adolescence challenges are real. In both narratives, students highlighted peer pressure and the 'desire to belong' as the major causes of teenage burdens. Laloyo explains that growing up as an orphan, she was a very lonely child who felt the need to be accepted by her friends at school. However, the peers she chose as her friends were of questionable character. Similarly, Langa says "I was a grade A student, always on top of my class. I had big dreams for my future. But all these came crashing down when I joined the wrong crowd…. My friends and I always hang out and partied most of the nights. I was introduced to women and alcohol …."

The two extracts highlight the misguided social life that teenagers always want to lead, involving 'hanging out' 'drinking' 'sexual encounters' 'and 'drugs'. While this paints a typical teenage culture, it also reflects associated behavioural challenges. It also highlights the vulnerability of this age group that makes them fall 'prey' to the wrong crowd. Layolo being an orphan, she lacked both material support and parental guidance. As such she was drawn to rich spoilt friends as coping mechanism. Langa on the other hand, simply made the wrong choice of friends. The narratives are used as discursive devices to highlight the burdens of teenage-hood and to draw attention to the need for understanding and not cruelty as the school policy dictates. The children that were dismissed from school could have similar underlying challenges.

Through the students' narratives, the consequences of teenagers' bad choices are reflected. Langa dropped out of school and took to mugging and pick-pocketing on city streets to sustain his drug addiction problem. While Laloyo became pregnant with a baby whose father (a fellow teenager) not only denied any responsibility, but

also suggested an abortion. The image of a sorrowful young girl, with a baby trying to console her (see figure 2) was a carefully selected semiotic resource to add visual weight to the framed vulnerable position of teenagers, especially the teenage girls, and also to create a sentimental mood; thereby, drawing attention to the complexities and contradictions of teenage hood. In as much as teenagers struggle to break from adult control, they are reflected as vulnerable and bad choice-makers, suggesting the need for adult guidance.

Similarly, the image of a baby wiping tears off her mother's face (see figure 2) creates a lighter mood, a sense of relief, and symbolically represents hope and a new beginning for teenagers (especially girls). It indicates that in spite of the many mistakes committed, teenagers are capable of fixing their own mistakes and becoming better people. Laloyo's words indicate she had learnt her lesson "In spite of the difficulties I went through, Trina my baby girl gives me the greatest joy. She grew up into an intelligent, loving and caring little soul who always made me smile. I am glad I did not abort her." This suggests a repositioning of teenagers, who after a phase of suffering, they are pulled back into reality to make better life choices.
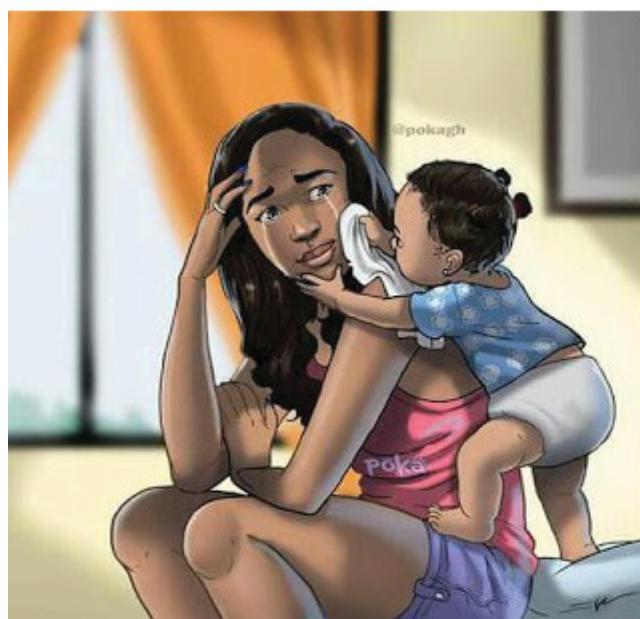


**Figure 2:** Images supporting students' arguments (Images obtained from https://www.google.com/imghp?hl=en).

In this context, students' literacy practice of appropriating semiotic resources with the textual narratives, created what Rogers et al. (2010) describe as a triple cultural narrative about teenage hood which involve behaviour commonly associated with the adolescents (drinking and partying), its causes (e.g. peer pressure) and consequences (drug addiction and teenage pregnancy) which serves to position teenage-hood as complex and contradictory phase. Conclusively, blog-mediated role play collaborative arguments provided students with opportunities to appropriate context-dependent knowledge and activate literacy practices aimed at building convincing positions and arguments for purposes of causing change in the status quo.

The second research question "how did the literacy practices enacted through engagement in online role play influence pre-service students' argumentative thinking and civic action?" required students to step out of their role play persona and do critical reflection on the roles they considered to elicit more agency in terms of framing ethical positions. Students also considered how the conflicting perspectives and discourses influenced their thinking and desire for civic action. Evidence from the study indicated that navigating through the conflicting positions, beliefs and perspectives projected during online role play broadened students' understanding of the contradicting views and increased their motivation to advocate for change in the school's phone policies.

### 5.4 Motivation for engagement to cause change

Evidence revealed that students were particularly motivated to engage in the online role play, because they wanted to cause change in those school policies that they considered 'repressive' and no longer applicable in the current times. The students perceived an online role play as an opportunity to "let out what they always felt

about these mobile phone school restrictions" and also they wanted "to create something that could be of use to the school children". According to Beach and Doerr-Stevens (2009, p.466) students are more likely to engage in argumentative thinking if they perceive an issue or problem being addressed to be a 'big deal for them'. The fact that pre-service students could not freely use their mobile devices during their high school days was a 'big deal' for them. As such, students were motivated to invest their time and effort in formulating argumentative texts citing moral, personal or ethical reasons for why the mobile phone restrictions are no longer applicable in schools today.

Most notably, was the high self-motivation and efficacy participants exhibited in producing the argumentative texts on the blog platform. While the initial stages proved overwhelming for students, they remained consistent in producing texts, while at the same time actively participated in exchanging views regarding the policy through the 'comment' function on the blog platform. Subsequently, a total of 434 comments were generated for the four months period, with the role of the legal representative, attracting the highest number of comments (57 comments), followed by the child rights activist with 54 comments and the school principal with 53 comments respectively (see http://ele3101collaborativewriting.blogspot.com/2018/04/). In many of the comments, students weighed the validity of specific positions presented by various role play characters. As such, interacting with an online community who share similar values and beliefs, provides participants with the 'I'm not alone' feeling which serves to build a "group's shared, collective belief that embolden collective action in social settings" (Beach and Doerr-Stevens 2011, p.177). Through these conversations, students unanimously agreed that blocking children from using their mobile devices during school time lacked consistence with the school's ideology of 'valued learning'. In their position paper, students wrote;

> We perceive 'valued learning' in schools as providing a supportive environment for learning, as empowering children to make their own decisions and allowing them to learn from their own mistakes. But this can't happen when schools are blocking access to digitalized learning or when children are threatened with dismissals.

Thus, the affordances of the blog-mediated role play provided students with an opportunity to engage in an online community conversation resulting into building a common understanding regarding the need for those policies to be revised. Beach and Doerr-Stevens, (2013) confirms that online engagements through blogs and social media platforms foster spaces for people to collaboratively posit, test out, and revise alternative position within a larger community for purposes of broadening students' understanding of issues and for enacting change in the status quo systems.

### 5.5 Broader understanding of the conflicting positions

Data indicated that participation in blog-mediated role play fostered engagement in conflicting positions and viewpoints which broadened their awareness regarding larger societal issues related to family, institutional cultures, and the legal system, as opposed to just the individual perspectives. In one of the student's reflection on how the varying positions in online role play changed her thinking, she replied;

> I began the role play with a totally different perspective. I fully supported the school's position to dismiss children who violated school policies. I always felt that rules must be respected, no matter what. However, my interaction with other roles especially the lawyer and his legal interpretation of the school's position, sort of opened my mind to a new way of thinking. I sort of realized that change in these policies is inevitable.

The student's views suggest an engagement in what Johnson and Johnson (2009) described as 'collaborative constructive controversy' which involves recognizing the validity of opposing perspectives, leading to self-interrogation of one's perspective, and creating a willingness for an individual to accommodate and work with alternative perspectives.

## 6. Conclusion and implications

The study illuminated several implications that could be relevant for further research. First, the study confirmed that participation in digitally-mediated online role play provided space for students to enact varying literacy practices, which fostered students' critical understandings of the issue and a desire to enact change. However, participation in this online role play was restricted to a small group of students, without any external online audiences such as real-life experts and school policy makers. It would be interesting for researchers to explore how the existence of external audiences would enrich students' online role play engagements. That is, would

the presence of real-life persons provoke deeper insights among students and increase "pedagogical authenticity"? (Scheider and Evans, 2008, p.4)

Secondly, the study proved that students especially in print-based pedagogical contexts, who are often assumed to lack 'autonomous' literacy skills, were capable of enacting multiple literacy practices, and re-create meanings across sites of engagement in the role play. The students orchestrated multiple modes (e.g. textual and visual modes), and framed positions linked to "cultural and power structures in society" (Street, 1994, p.433), thereby engaging in "hybrid discourse practice". These practices reflected students as "literate creators" of new models of literacy which include "sophisticated visual literacies and evidence of mixing, mashing and collaging of discursive forms" (Rogers et al., 2010). Researchers, especially in the field of new literacies would explore further the potential of other ubiquitous digital tools to support the development of the novel skills associated with effective argumentative practices mediated through online pedagogical practices as opposed to the conventional print-based pedagogies. However, as Beach and Doerr-Stevens (2013) argue that practitioners who wish to develop such novel skills need to adequately prepare learners for the complexities involved.

In addition, the current study focused on a small group of ESL pre-service students who were about to complete their English Language teacher training course at university. These students exhibited a range of well-developed digital and non-digital competencies related to argumentative writing. In addition, the majority were proficient online users who easily transferred knowledge of their social media engagements to creating credible role play characters and building strategic relationships on the blog platform. However, the study did not consider students who often experience difficulties with argumentative writing, or those with limited digital skills. As such, further investigation is needed to explore possibilities of using other online platforms to provide struggling students with opportunities for digital writing, specifically focusing the social constructivist spaces that promote open dialogue and collaborative knowledge construction (Whittaker, Howarth and Lymn, 2014) in order for students to work through their difficulties. As Thalluli and Penman (2014, p. 462), observe that "the dynamic written format afforded by online tools allows for both real time and delayed responses which is beneficial for shy, reticent or ESL students who find it hard to contribute in real time face to face activities such as tutorials". In addition, the current study proved that if adequately supported, students have the ability to enact a range of digital and non-digital literacy practices to develop authorship especially in the area of argumentative writing which is challenging for most students. It is also clear that the support given to students for their online role play engagements needs to be clear and timely as was provided via weekly workshops and other supports during the course of this study.

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