Intimacy in online classrooms

Linguaplay, personal testimonies, and contrived chaotic material ecologies

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In this article I describe the transition of a group of university students in Australia into an online learning environment during COVID-19 pandemic disruptions. I reflect upon my intersubjective experiences as the lecturer in an unexpected situation of urgency and physical distancing. Research has acknowledged synchronous virtual learning contexts as less psychologically distancing than previously thought. I argue that these contexts can foster profound intimacy between participants through linguistic and multimodal means. I use an auto-ethnographic narrative inquiry approach to share observations gained retrospectively through multimodal, critically reflexive, social semiotic discourse analysis of audio-visual recordings of synchronous workshops conducted in 2020. I attempt to fill the gap in research on intimacy in online educational settings by suggesting that intimacy can be created by *linguaplay, personal testimonies,* and *contrived chaotic material ecologies*. I advocate moving away from an obsession with standardising and generating student knowledge in formal online learning to a stance that values intimacy, connection, and spontaneity.

Keywords: intimacy, online learning, linguaplay, personal testimonies, material ecologies

1. Introduction

COVID-19 disruptions to education in Australia in March 2020 brought students who had enrolled in a face-to-face university course into the online learning sphere without warning. Delivering content via online mode is not new for Australian universities (Ananga & Biney, 2017), but this was different. Neither the students nor the teacher had opted to be online halfway through a unit of study.

Students would not only be virtually distanced but mandated, by the Australian government, to be physically distanced as well.

An earlier conversation with a course coordinator about online unit design went along the lines of "everything should be written down", presented in a standardized format, leaving nothing to chance. He cited academic quality indicators suggesting that units of study need to be "non-trivial, auditable, quantifiable and generalizable" (Coates, 2010, p. 6). These words weighed heavily upon me as they seemed to tell a different story to the words 'dialogue', 'spontaneity', and 'intimacy' (Artino & Jones, 2012; Lehtonen et al., 2008), which I, and many others (Heflich & Putney, 2001; Lessing, 2013; Uttamchandani, 2020), believe can indirectly affect the quality of the intersubjective experiences of both lecturers and students. Classroom intimacy may not be measurable, but it is important for individual and larger social outcomes (Uttamchandani, 2020). It "is not only where learners wind up" that is significant but "how possibilities are (re)organized in collaborative interaction" (Uttamchandani, 2020, p. 3).

During the COVID lockdown, an important aspect of where the learners and I ended up working was our personal spaces. I was curious how this reorganization of spaces impacted our collaborative interaction and potential for intimacy. My home workspace was chaotic, with limited access to technological assistance; awash with papers, used coffee cups, photographs, sticky notes, bottles of perfume, books, sunglasses, and business cards. Would it be possible to create intimacy in such circumstances and, if so, how would the virtual classroom discourse foster intimacy?

2.   Intimacy in face-to-face educational settings

Intimacy has been conceptualized as psychological closeness and connection in educational settings (Wood, 2002). As long ago as 1968, Anderson talked about a class having a "distinct personality" or "social climate", which includes interpersonal relationships between teachers and students, students and students (Anderson, 1968, p. 135). He investigated cohesiveness and intimacy amongst students, finding that the influence of intimacy on learning was significant. Later, in 2004, Dobransky and Bainbridge Frymier further validated Anderson's findings in their study of 284 undergraduate university students. Those students who perceived their teachers to display high levels of shared control, trust, and intimacy reported greater learning. This provided evidence that closeness between teachers and students can enhance learning, motivation, and positive student outcomes.

More recently, Stojanov (2016) talked about the benefits of classroom settings in which there is trust. Learning is egalitarian and conceptualized as dialogic in

these contexts (Baepler & Walker, 2014; Plaza, 2010). Sometimes described as *educational intimacy*, learning is re-imagined as relationships impacting mutual well-being; a kind of closeness which mandates vulnerability and promotes collective advancement (Uttamchandani, 2020). This kind of learning relies on "slowability, incalculability, serendipity and unpredictability" (p. 264) as well as "curiosity, vulnerability, empathy and irreducibility" (p. 266), according to Lapidaki's (2020) study of university music students. Other studies in the foreign language learning classroom (Cutrone, 2009) have also reported intimacy as key to learning. Cutrone's (2009) study of Japanese learners of English talked about the role of classroom intimacy in reducing students' anxiety about evaluation, leading to greater learning. Stevick called this the "removal of the teacher's mask" (Stevick, 1980 cited in Cutrone, 2009, p. 60).

Intimacy can be created in a classroom through creative and imaginative play (Gray, 2013). This can manifest itself as talk, or what Bateson (1953) has referred to as a *play frame.* Participants need to see that a play frame has been established and choose to maintain it (Coates, 2007). They then develop an *interactive pact* (McCarthy & Carter, 2004, p. 172) or agreement. Building this solidarity is key to the development of intimacy (Coates, 2007). Play can emerge organically from spontaneous and co-constructed humor (Coates, 2007). In this way, learners and lecturers show "how finely tuned they are to each other" (Davies, 2003, p. 1362). Rather than being seen as "off-task behavior", language play has been re-imagined as students constructing a broader range of classroom identities (Pomerantz & Bell, 2011, p. 149), which give them a pedagogical safe house within which to learn (Canagarajah, 2004).

Intimacy has also been created through storytelling. Students and teachers can tell s*mall stories,* which are "unrehearsed" and immediate, containing false starts, hesitations, unfinished sentences, interruptions, and contradictions (Ochs & Capps, 2002, p. 56). Stories may not unfold sequentially or even have a plot line. They are less practiced, less contrived, less coherent, more ubiquitous, but central to ordinary social encounters. They explore "the human condition" (p. 57). Personalized storytelling in the classroom has been shown to break down cultural, linguistic, and social barriers (Allen & Doherty, 2004). It has been endorsed as an effective teaching tool in many traditional face-to-face classroom settings (Baskerville, 2011; Csikar & Stefaniak, 2018) and in higher education settings (Abrahamson, 1998).

3.   Intimacy in multimodal online educational settings

The lack of intimacy in formal educational online spaces has been bemoaned by many (Hawkins et al., 2012). This perspective has been questioned in more recent years, however, due to the use of cameras, microphones, and other modalities in synchronous settings (Rudd & Rudd, 2014). Paralinguistic behavior, gaze, mutual gaze, eye contact, distance, and affiliation can all be captured now in the online space. This has been called *Social Presence*, described as "feeling intimacy or togetherness in terms of sharing time and place" (Shin, 2002, p. 22). *Telepresence* (technology enhanced feelings of being present in a virtual setting) and *co-presence* (being engaged in real time social activities online with others) (Chen, 2020; Chen & Dobinson, 2020) can be achieved by platform features such as emoticons, stickers (Lin & Chen, 2018; Wang, 2015), and side text chat (Rourke et al., 2001; Swan, 2003). Social Presence has been shown to increase students' participation and motivation to learn (Bair & Bair, 2011; Gosmire et al., 2009; Hrastinski, 2008) while flattening power differentials that impact learners' agency and autonomy (Dörnyei, 2020). Moreover, realism, understanding and retention of knowledge can be achieved through mechanisms such as "vividness" and "elaboration" in the synchronous, multimodal talk (Kendall & Kendall, 2017, p. 76).

Informal play spaces such as Facebook have encouraged participants to "mess around" with language (Dovchin, 2015, p. 455; Dovchin, Pennycook, & Sultana, 2017; Sultana et al., 2013) using words with additional meanings, different scripts, and distortions of original meanings to produce humor (Li & Zhu, 2019). This relies on shared knowledge of local history/realities/meanings/stories, language, cultural attitudes, irony, and mockery (Canagarajah & Dovchin, 2019; Sultana & Dovchin, 2019; Thorpe, 2008). Although diversity in the translingual practices of international students online have been documented to some extent (Yin et al., 2021), the creation of play and storytelling as a means of learning in formal online educational settings has received less recognition. The same is true of students' social and material contexts. Canagarajah (2021, p. 207) has suggested that we view communication as "an activity that involves objects and environmental affordances." He draws on the ideas behind New Materialism (Coole & Frost, 2010), which consider objects and spaces as more agentive in interaction than previously thought. In New Materialism, meanings and thinking are seen as emerging from the "distributed practice" between people, social groups, and the surrounding material ecologies (Canagarajah, 2021, p. 207). In other words, the role of the material ecology of the online sessions is acknowledged for the impact that it has on interaction and the building of classroom intimacy. In short, the possibilities for intimacy in online educational forums have gone beyond just the static features of the digital platform to dynamic analytical frameworks that

incorporate the principals of social semiotics, interactional sociolinguistics, multimodal interaction analysis, and New Materialism.

4.   Research design

I used an interpretivist, auto-ethnographic approach to tell my story (Kim, 2015; Pérez-Sedeño et al., 2019). I was reflexive (Creese et al., 2017), recognizing that no two people will see things in the same way. Rather, meanings are generated by, and dependent upon, the discourses available and multiple interpretations of the same phenomenon are possible (Richardson & St Pierre, 2008). Permission to conduct the research was given by the university's Human Ethics Committee. Students were traced through university records to obtain their permission to use their anonymized side text chat. All students gave their written consent.

4.1   Participants

Participants were me, a British Australian university lecturer, and 25 third-year undergraduate students in the Bachelor of Education course at an Australian university. The 12-week unit of study was *Language and Diversity*. The last seven weeks were spent fully online. Students started on 24 February and continued until 5 June 2020. All students had access to synchronous workshops on Blackboard Ultra Collaborate and recordings of these. They were between the ages of 20 and 30 years old and all were either Australian born or resident in Western Australia for a good part of their schooling. Three students were of Indian, Lebanese, and Turkish background originally but all three spoke fluent English.

4.2   Data collection

I drew on detailed recollections of brief, but critical events (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) co-constructed with eight students (out of 25 students enrolled) during seven weeks of synchronous online contact. I used narrative inquiry to retrospectively explore and reflect upon the learning and teaching in my class during this time, recognizing that the stories I chose to tell were my own views of reality at a specific time (Richardson & St Pierre, 2008, p. 477). Each workshop was two hours in duration. Students did not turn on their cameras and rarely turned on their microphones. Data were collected from transcriptions of audio recordings and side text chat obtained during the synchronous sessions.

4.3   Data analysis

Data were interpreted, and meaning negotiated, through a critical reflexive process which acknowledged the potential for subjectivity in the findings. Being reflexive (Fortune & Mair, 2011) allowed me to be present, questioning my own observations, thoughts, and beliefs, and how these were represented. Analysis of extracts of talk required me to untangle mutual digressions, laughter, irony, banter, and asides interwoven into the discourse by making sense of the relationship building that was taking place (Uttamchandani, 2020). Multimodal, semiotic discourse analysis enabled me to analyze the recordings and text chat closely, considering setting, picture, sound, color, space, image, gesture, gaze, camera position, perspective, lighting effects, posture, paralinguistic features, gesture, and back channel behavior (Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; O'Halloran, 2004). These were only commented upon when linked with the creation of intimacy, however. Findings are reported using vignettes. These "ask readers to relive the experience through the writer's or performer's eyes" (Denzin, 2000, p. 905). They are taken to be "representative, typical, or emblematic" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 81) of a human experience (Fludernik, 2009) and can be multimodally analyzed and deconstructed (Creese et al., 2017). Reviewing the recorded interactive data of the online workshops, several vignettes stood out as examples of the way intimacy unfolded in the online space. These are discussed in the next sections. Participants' names are pseudonyms.

5.   Linguaplay

By the time students reached the second workshop online (and the sixth in the series of workshops for the unit), they were using play frames (Bateson, 1953). They had become creative and imaginative in these frames (Gray, 2013). They collaborated and turned talk into language play (Coates, 2007), or what I have called *linguaplay* – linguistic playfulness where participants use linguistic devices such as metaphors, similes, puns, onomatopoeia, and many more, in their communication. This linguaplay relied on shared knowledge of local history in Australia, the referencing of local realities (Sultana & Dovchin, 2019), and localized meanings (Canagarajah & Dovchin, 2019). Students (and the lecturer) unwittingly involved themselves in the same kinds of *interactive pacts* described by McCarthy and Carter (2004, p. 172). They allowed linguaplay to emerge organically to create humor as seen in Vignette 1, where Andrew uses metaphor to conceptualize the term 'compliment return'. He enters into an interactive pact between the lecturer

and the students to allow him to do so. The topic under discussion is complimenting in different cultural contexts.

Vignette 1. Linguaplay – metaphors

#	Discussant	Blackboard collaborate recording of interaction	Mode
1	Teacher Toni	Now the next one …everyone should remember this so I am expecting a few things in that side chat for this one …What is a 'compliment return'? …Oh Tandy has just joined	Audio
2	Student Tandy	Sorry Toni… it totally slipped my mind and then I looked at the time and I was like AAgh!!!	Audio
3	Teacher Toni	Never mind we're just doing revision that's all	Audio
4	Student Andrew	When you use the uno reverse card!	Side text chat
5	Student Tandy	Okay …thank you	Audio
6	Teacher Toni	You're welcome.	Audio
7	Teacher Toni	…Andrew's saying when you use the uno reverse card ….That's a very good metaphor Andrew …I'm glad you are here and not off having a cup of tea like last week …(laughing)	Audio
8	Student Brenda	Hahahaha	Side text chat
9	Student Andrew	When you either accept or decline the compliment with complimenting the other person	Side text chat
10	Student Andrew	Slow typer	Side text chat

Use of the word 'everyone' in Line 1 indicates a community of practice in the virtual space (Wenger, 1998). My style resembles a talk back radio announcer when I indicate that I am expecting them to know the answer to my question. I give students license to use the side text chat rather than microphones to dispel any anxieties they might have about bandwidth, video/audio quality (Akarasriworn & Ku, 2013), and privacy. I build solidarity, a key component of intimacy (Coates, 2007), in this way. A student called Tandy joins the session late and distracts students from answering my initial question. Her name appears in the list of participants, so I am able to call her by name thus creating more intimacy and togetherness (Shin, 2002). This also gives her a feeling of belonging in the course. Meanwhile, in Line 4, Andrew engages in linguaplay in his answer to my original question. His response in Line 7 seems out of context because it appears sometime after my question in Line 1 and after Tandy's interruption. He likens a "compliment return" to "using the uno reverse card", referring to the card

game Uno where the person who plays the 'reverse' card reverses the order of the game. A compliment return, similarly, is giving a compliment back to someone who has complimented you. Andrew relies on students' shared knowledge of this card game (Sultana & Dovchin, 2019) from their childhoods (Canagarajah & Dovchin, 2019) to understand his metaphor. He is creative and humorous and links the theoretical and the everyday. Although he is in a formal educational setting, he behaves like a Facebook user, "having fun" with language (Dovchin, 2015, p. 455). The side text chat records students' linguaplay, and responses to it. I can return easily to his witty response after being interrupted by Tandy; something that might not happen in face-to-face mode where the discourse is more ephemeral. The multiple feeds also reduce teacher control and allow uninterrupted interaction (Garrison, 2009). I boost Andrew's confidence by complimenting him ("That's a very good metaphor Andrew …") and continue the banter in Line 7 ("I'm glad you are here and not off having a cup of tea like last week … [laughing]"). This lets Andrew know that I remember him from the previous week and that he is part of the community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Andrew further explains his metaphor, and why it has taken him so long to respond, in Line 9, when he types (Line 10) "Slow typer." This chat fosters group empathy and creates warmth and presence (Guichon & Cohen, 2014).

I have chosen to showcase another instance of linguaplay in Week 10 (the sixth workshop in online mode). The topic for the workshop was thanking across different cultural contexts. Students used many of the taxonomies described by Pomerantz and Bell (2011), Goatly (2012), Reddington (2015), and Li and Zhu (2019). These included 'defeated expectations' (when a speaker says something totally different to what the audience expects), incongruity, one-liners, teases, wordplay, and slight distortions of the original meanings of words. They interacted in ways similar to the face-to-face classroom (Coates, 2007; Cumming, 2007; Reddington, 2015) where children and language learning adults have been reported to have a natural predilection towards spontaneous language play but also brought language practices commonly seen in informal online settings (Dovchin, 2015) to the virtual room through the side text chat. This is seen in Vignette 2.

The interaction begins in Lines 1, 2, and 3 with me asking students about their preferred ways of expressing gratitude. Jenny and Christine respond. In Line 4 I reiterate their responses to indicate that I have paid attention and alert other students to them. This also lets Jenny and Christine feel that I value their contributions in our community of practice (Bair & Bair, 2011; Gosmire et al., 2009; Hrastinski, 2008; Wenger, 1998). Because of the play frame (Bateson, 1953) and interactive pact (McCarthy & Carter, 2004), built up by the classroom intimacy over the weeks, Christine then jokes, "If someone was giving me a kidney, I'd go

Vignette 2. Linguaplay – puns, defeated expectations, one-liners

#	Discussant	Blackboard collaborate recording of interaction	Mode
1	Teacher Toni	When you say thank you to someone is it enough or do you usually go out and get a gift or something or what do you normally do...or do you just think thank you is enough?	Audio
2	Student Jenny	Depends what you are thanking them for	Side text chat
3	Student Christine	Depends on the situation	Side text chat
4	Teacher Toni	Oh depends what you are thanking them for..yeah ...yeah... that's true...so if they've done something really huge for you ...erm ...you know...big time...then you might possibly give them a gift erm	Audio
5	Student Christine	If someone was giving me a kidney, I'd go out and buy them something	Side text chat
6	Teacher Toni	(laughs) Oh Christine ...ok that's certainly something I never thought about...so someone gives you their kidney you'd go out and buy something for them? Well you would once you recovered I s'pose ...	Audio
7	Student Brenda	😂	Side text chat
8	Student James	Steak and kidney pie	Side text chat

out and buy them something." The incongruity (Reddington, 2015) and "defeated expectations" (Goatly, 2012, p. 23) of this remark cause me to laugh and I reiterate this response for the class in Line 6, indicating that this is a thoughtful response. Humor has been created and sanctioned so I add a one-liner of my own (Goatly, 2012): "Well you would once you recovered I s'pose." Brenda shows her amusement and solidarity with a smiley face emoticon (😂). James continues with a pun on the word "kidney", suggesting that the present that might be given to the kidney donor could be a "steak and kidney pie." As described by Coates (2007), he creatively picks up on points which emerge organically from co-constructed talk (Coates, 2007). This humorous diversion creates intimacy between participants.

6.   Personal testimonies

In Week 8 of the course (and Week 5 of being online) we were experiencing panic buying in the supermarkets in Western Australia. Tensions were high over the availability of scarce resources. I came to the workshop and vented my small story

(Kim, 2015), relying on the trust and interactive pact (McCarthy & Carter, 2004) built up between me and the students over previous weeks to allow such intimate talk (Dobransky & Baynbridge Frymier, 2004). I thought my story highlighting the "human condition" (Ochs & Capps, 2002, p. 57) would create solidarity (Coates, 2007) and intimacy, as well as provide a segue into related content.

Small story – Laying myself bare

> If I do seem a little bit out of kilter today ....I encountered ...the most alarming kind of COVID rage ...I've had so far .... at the erm checkout ...you know how you have to do your own bags now ... I was going as fast as I could and this chap ...I don't know ...he must have been in his late 60s ... starting commenting ...saying you know ...something like erm 'Well if you could just get a move on I would be able to get through here'...I went 'Oh sorry I can't go any faster... I'm just packing as fast as I can' and then he said 'Well if you just stop faffing around and get them in' and I was like (puffs air out) ...'Excuse me' ...so I said 'Would you mind not being so rude' and then he said 'Well would you mind just getting a f...king move on'...so I was like 'Oh ok' ...so I just silently went as slow as I could.

My small story is "situated, discursive and relational" (Uttamchandani, 2020, p. 6). I build the scene and relate to students' sense of common experience by using the words "you know." I include direct speech, and that of the other interlocutor, which gives the story vibrancy, credibility, and the sense of intimacy created by gossip, especially amongst adolescents (Aikens et al., 2015) ("so I said 'Would you mind not being so rude?' and then he said 'Well would you mind just getting a f... move on'"). The story is colloquial and non-academic, with the use of "was like" instead of "said" ("I was like (puffs air out) … 'Excuse me'; "so I was like 'Oh ok'"). I risk showing myself in a bad light, so this becomes a different kind of small story; or what I have called a *personal testimony*. Testimonies have been described as "open acknowledgments" (Merriam-Webster, n.d., Definition 1), "accounts of first-hand experience" (Your Dictionary, n.d., Definition 12), "personal or documentary evidence or attestation in support of a fact or statement" (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d., Definition 1) "including a confession" (Definition 5).

Students respond by showing empathy, advising, and endorsing my actions with their own small stories or personal testimonies. As in other studies of online classroom behavior, they make use of the multimodal features of the platform (especially the side text chat space) (Heflich & Putney, 2001) to give their responses emotionality and intensity (Rourke et al., 2001; Swan, 2003). They

include emojis, capitalization, symbols, written verbal communication, and ono-matopoeic utterances (Lin & Chen, 2018; Wang, 2015). As observed in the literature about online classrooms (Kendall & Kendall, 2017; Thorpe, 2008) and face-to-face classrooms (Baskerville, 2011; Csikar & Stefaniak, 2018), they tell their small stories as seen in Vignette 3.

Vignette 3. Chain stories

#	Discussant	Blackboard collaborate recording of interaction	Mode
1	Katie	Bit rude 🙁	Side text chat
2	Jenny	Should have coughed really loud near him	Side text chat
3	Brenda	HAHAHA	Side text chat
4	Brenda	^^^	Side text chat
5	Andrew	hahaha	Side text chat
6	James	I work at Coles …I see these kinds of people all the time…people get so angry and personally offended…	Side text chat
7	Katie	This guy made me move out of his way today at woolies	Side text chat
8	James	No different store	Side text chat
9	Katie	Another guy coughed on my face the other day 🙁	Side text chat
10	James	oof	Side text chat
11	Bob	Wow wtf	Side text chat

The extract begins with Katie giving a short, commonly used response amongst young people when people behave in ways which are not acceptable ("bit rude") accompanied by a sad faced emoji (🙁). The emoji is powerful and memorable in conveying her dislike of the situation. Jenny then adds her own personal advice in Line 2, which, like me, also shows her in a slightly aggressive light. She has laid herself bare with this comment, displaying trust in her fellow students not to judge her badly (Dobransky & Bainbridge Frymier, 2004). She has also shared control with the lecturer by producing her own story and taking the floor, something Dobransky and Bainbridge Frymier (2004) suggest leads to intimacy amongst participants and greater learning.

Brenda and Andrew find this rejoinder humorous, indicated by HAHAHA, ^^^ and hahaha in lines 3, 4, and 5, building solidarity in their multimodal responses (Coates, 2007). Humor in this interaction allows users to investigate what they know in new ways including things that may be seen as taboo or difficult (Coates, 2007). Once this interactive pact (McCarthy & Carter, 2004) is established, James is encouraged to add his own personal testimony in Line 6.

Again, his story is a testament to my story and similarly judgmental. Katie (Line 7) then contributes her testimony, describing a "guy" who made her move out of his way at the supermarket and also talking about a guy who "coughed on [her] face" (Line 9). She shows her reaction to this using a sad emoji (😕). Again, the visual impact of this emoji reinforces feelings which may not have been entirely conveyed by the tone of her voice in a face-to-face setting. James provides written onomatopoeic vocalization of his distaste for what has occurred ("oof") and is received by Bob with surprise in Line 11 ("Wow") and an expletive ("wtf"). Bob echoes the linguaplay of informal online settings such as Facebook (Dovchin, 2015; Sultana et al., 2013). Following these exchanges, students try to imagine how things might have played out in different cultural settings. In this way, testimonies can progress understanding of the academic content in the unit while also being an end in, and of, themselves (Uttamchandani, 2020). This solidarity building may have been hampered in a face-to-face classroom setting due to student inhibition, physical distance in the room, teacher pre-occupation with delivery of content and teacher inability to hear what was being said between students (Coates, 2007). As part of our interactive pact (McCarthy & Carter, 2004), the students and I revealed intimate details about our private lives while expressing anger. This was possible because the online virtual classroom felt like a pedagogical safe house (Canagarajah, 2004). Testimonies were kept vital by the constraint of the time taken to type responses. There was mutual understanding that our collaborative interaction would "(re)organize possibilities" in our workshops and lessen the focus on where we were supposed to end up (Uttamchandani, 2020, p. 3).

Personal testimonies again formed a basis for intimacy and learning in a workshop later in the semester through the engagement of real-world pedagogical examples. This time a student (Amanda) laid herself bare with her testimony about teaching in a local primary school, telling a story which showed her work colleagues in a bad light and revealing the personal discomfort she also experienced in the situation. As in Lapidaki's (2020, p. 266) study, intimacy was created through Amanda's "vulnerability." Empathy in the classroom participants was evoked by this vulnerability seen in Vignette 4.

Line 1 sees me introduce a question then answer it myself in Line 2 when noone comes forward. I add a personal testimony about my experiences at a local multilingual primary school. Amanda then builds solidarity with me in Line 3, contributing her own similar personal testimony ("Have witnessed this in school as an EA...Parents feel very alienated"). I alert students to her response in Line 4 to make sure students pay attention to it. I then ask her to clarify her story, maintaining a sense of learning as egalitarian and dialogic, as described by Baepler and Walker (2014). I reassure her that her attitudes, values, and aspirations have been heard, appreciated, and respected (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Stojanov,

Vignette 4. Students laying themselves bare

#	Discussant	Blackboard recording of interaction	Mode
1	Teacher Toni	How might we support translanguaging in classrooms?	Audio
2	Teacher Toni	It's the kind of thing that is very controversial…For example I was at XXX school before all this happened and …. (teacher continues on with her story) …I think teachers feel threatened if they don't know other languages…they feel they've lost control	Audio
3	Student Amanda	Have witnessed this in school as an EA…Parents feel very alienated	Side text chat
4	Teacher Toni	Amanda is saying she has witnessed this in a school as an Educational Assistant…What do you mean Amanda?	Audio
5	Student Amanda	Erm so the school I work at …is predominantly South African …not really but at least…and when families come in they speak in Afrikaans and teachers ask us as EAs to tell them not to because it alienates those who speak English so it's really hard for me to walk up to a parent and say 'Hey, could you just speak in English please…like…?	Audio

2016), again in an attempt to build solidarity, break down social barriers (Allen & Doherty, 2004), and build a relationship (Thorpe, 2008).

Amanda then turns on her microphone in Line 5. She probably realizes that this is easier for longer testimonies, and, after a hesitant start ("Erm"), where she no doubt quickly weighs up the issues of privacy and criticality, she relates her awkward experiences with parents speaking their own languages in schools. She creates an opportunity for deep critical thinking and educational intimacy (Uttamchandani, 2020), in this instance, and is given educational sanctuary (Espinoza, 2009) and politicized trust (Vakil et al., 2016) by the group (and me) for revealing her personal testimony. She builds a relationship necessary for learning (Uttamchandani, 2020). Her personal involvement in the topic helps strengthen not only her understanding of the topic, but the groups' understanding, facilitating students' retention of knowledge (Kendall & Kendall, 2017), making content more 'real' for everyone. Students' capacity to tell their small stories or personal testimonies fitted with literature in the area which suggests that storytelling in online educational settings (and traditional face-to-face settings) can enhance "trust, excitement and comprehension" (Kendall & Kendall, 2017, p. 77). It can provide "realism" and promote "retention", reinforcing social presence (Kendall & Kendall, 2017, p. 77) and leading to classroom intimacy.

7.   Contrived chaotic material ecologies

In the introduction, I described my misgivings about my busy, chaotic, visible workspace impacting negatively on my relationship with students online. I could not change where I worked but I could at least tidy it up. However, after a few attempts, and a hectic schedule, I decided to just run with it. I wondered if the personalized setting might complement and promote the intimate online environment I was hoping would be achieved. I wanted a *material ecology,* which featured movement, unpredictability, and artifacts, to punctuate the otherwise static experience. In other words, a *contrived chaotic material ecology* achieved by not using a green screen, deliberately leaving photographs, diffusers, records, and CDs spilling out of shelves and shopping bags on the desks behind me. I would emulate students' own chaotic settings as they were forced to create workspaces in small bedrooms, kitchens, or even on public transport. I adjusted the angle of my screen and camera so that my son's cat, Arizona, was always in view, as well as my husband's vast record collection. I never saw my students or their workspaces, but they confessed to me how they were still in their pajamas at 2pm and how their rooms were in a mess. I decided that seeing me in a similar state of informality, chaos, and vulnerability (Lapidaki, 2020; Uttamchandani, 2020) could reduce hierarchies, create solidarity (Coates, 2007; Davies, 2003), and foster intimacy leading to learning during an uncertain and stressful period.

I moved from the side of the computer screen (Week Six) to slightly more direct and centered as the weeks went on, probably as I gained confidence and was assured of the sufficiency of my technology at home. By the end of the study period, I was again sitting in a more casual sideways fashion, giving Arizona more of the stage. She mirrored, or was in reverse to, my gaze. Initially, I was far away from the camera but by the end I was very close (as was Arizona), perhaps in my unconscious effort to get closer to the students. Students commented on my setting and how Arizona moved from the back of the room initially, onto my knee, then ended up cheek by jowl with me in the final screen as can be seen in Figure 1. Her movement was unpredictable and chaotic as she sometimes jumped across the keyboard. This movement was central to the video function (Baldry & Thibault, 2006). She became so much a part of the virtual community that students exclaimed in the side text chat for the final week, "It's the cat! She's behind you again! ... just waiting." Her movement punctuated what might have been long periods of visual inactivity.

This relaxed ecology fostered what Lapidaki (2020, p. 264) has called "slowability, incalculability, serendipity and unpredictability in learning and teaching" in her study of music instruction in higher education. There was no sense of hurtling towards a goal, no distinct calculation of time, workshops could spill over into

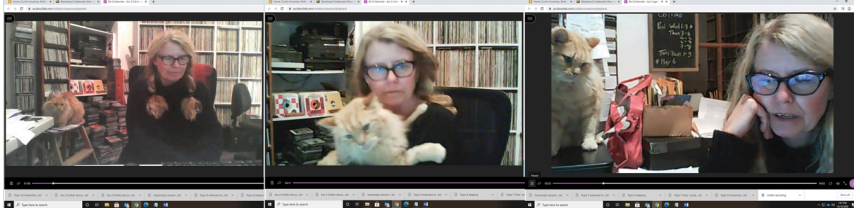other workshops, along with bags spilling over with their contents. Unpredictability was welcomed (i.e., the cat).

Figure 1. Sharing my teaching workspace with Arizona

8. Discussion

I revisited the recordings of my online virtual workshops to find out if it had been possible to create intimacy in these spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions and, if so, how? What was it that had occurred in the new circumstances and setting, and the virtual classroom discourse to foster intimacy? My preoccupation with this was based on research suggesting that classroom intimacy can facilitate learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Coates, 2007; Dobransky & Bainbridge, 2004; Lapidaki, 2020; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Uttamchandani, 2020). I also had an underlying uneasiness with the neoliberal system operating in my university context, which does not recognize or value this intimacy, but rather measures learning solely through academic capability statements (Coates, 2010).

I found that Anderson's (1968, p. 136) seminal notion of a "classroom social climate" could be achieved, not only in traditional face-to-face settings, but in an online virtual classroom setting. The traditional classroom "cohesiveness or intimacy among pupils" (Anderson, 1968, p. 136), which he suggested was crucial to the creation of interaction and learning, was also present in the online classroom interaction that I analyzed. It was achieved through mechanisms such as students playing with language (linguaplay), the lecturer and students telling small stories (personal testimonies), and the lecturer setting up a workspace that looked relaxed and personalized in its messiness (contrived chaotic material ecology). Alongside this, the multimodal features of the digital platform, such as cameras, microphones, emoticons, and side text chat further facilitated the establishment of intimacy in the virtual space.

Linguaplay was specifically encountered in the areas of metaphor, pun, one-liners, and "defeated expectations" (Goatly, 2012, p. 23). In the vignettes provided, students showed they were accomplished with using language in this way. They

replicated informal play spaces, such as Facebook, in the virtual classroom, creating "novel meanings that inspire and disturb by changing our perspective on reality" (Eynon, 2001, p. 353). This may have been helped by the fact that they had more time to cogitate when using the side text chat. The desire and capacity to interject with wit and humor, creating play frames as described by Bateson (1953), seemed to motivate the students to engage in a more meaningful way with the content of the workshops. This is significant, as research shows that engagement results in better learning outcomes (Carini et al., 2006). To this end, I would join with researchers who have called for "non-serious language" to be "taken more seriously" (Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005, p. 169).

Personal testimonies were facilitated by mutual trust and a sense of security, built up over the study period – important components in building the intimacy that can eventuate in student learning (Dobransky & Bainbridge Frymier, 2004; Lapidaki, 2020; McCarthy & Carter, 2004; Stojanov, 2016; Vakil et al., 2016). Educational intimacy was created by me and the students being willing to lay ourselves bare and make confessions in our personal testimonies, forming a distinct kind of closeness (Uttamchandani, 2020). This was based on mutual respect, as discussed by Stojanov (2016), and the creation of egalitarianism and dialogue (Baepler & Walker, 2014; Plaza, 2010). As described by Kendall and Kendall (2017), this realism and "vividness" added to understanding and aided episodic memory (Kendall & Kendall, 2017, p. 76) with testimonies contributing to the topics being discussed in the workshops as part of the subject content. Like in Abrahamson's (1998) study in a higher education context, storytelling became a pedagogical tool.

Material ecologies formed a significant part of my attempts to create a setting that was reflective of multiple realities (Satar, 2015) and identities. I tried to co-construct a material ecology, which put learners at ease, cognizant of the fact that semiotics play a large role in meaning making and that all activity is impacted by "objects and environmental affordances" (Canagarajah, 2021, p. 207). In this instance, messiness and unpredictability came together to create what I called contrived chaos. This was used to create interest, to engage students and to flatten power differentials that can impact learners' agency, autonomy, and motivation (Dörnyei, 2020). The role of my son's cat, Arizona, was pivotal in creating connection between the students and me. She provided movement, color, space, gaze, image, perspective, and unpredictability, which contributed to a non-threatening setting (Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; O'Halloran, 2004). New meanings and thinking emerged from the "distributed practice" that took place between myself and the students due to the surrounding material ecology (Canagarajah, 2021, p. 207).

Much of the above was also enhanced by the multimodal features of the digital platform, especially cameras, microphones, side text chat, and other modalities. These mediated our online experience, enabling telepresence and co-presence to be created (Chen, 2020; Chen & Dobinson, 2020), and building solidarity (Rourke et al., 2001; Rudd & Rudd, 2014; Swan, 2003). In particular, the side text chat fostered the use of short, direct sentences by students in their linguaplay and personal testimonies, motivating them to contribute possibly more than they would have in a face-to-face forum. They could respond with short, pithy, informal, direct text chat without fear of being seen as impolite due to the conventions of this genre. Multiple feeds enabled the teacher to become just one of many players in the room, capturing events that might ordinarily have been missed in the face-to-face classroom and disrupting hierarchies. The use of the side text chat provided a safe space for students to use abbreviations to represent expletives to intensify their responses. This was central to students having fun with language and "chilling out" (Dovchin, 2015, p. 456). As in previous studies (Lin & Chen, 2018; Rudd & Rudd, 2014; Wang, 2015), emoticons, emojis and stickers contributed to feelings of emotion in the room, while facial anonymity (student cameras were all turned off) provided students with a pedagogical safe house (Canagarajah, 2004). Conversely, being able to see students' names on the screen meant students did not go unnoticed by me (Guichon & Cohen, 2014). This provided a sense of community, which increased participation, motivation, and intimacy (Bair & Bair, 2011; Gosmire et al., 2009; Hrastinski, 2008; Wenger, 1998). The camera enhanced the material ecology of the workshops by featuring Arizona, the cat, and the personalized setting of my workspace.

9.   Conclusion

The observations outlined above are, of course, my own, based on the discourses available to me (Richardson & St Pierre, 2008). Formal student evaluation tools, however, supported my instincts. There was 100% overall satisfaction with the unit, with two students expressing appreciation of the intimacy that we had created through personal testimonies, saying: "Teacher Toni was willing to share her experiences"; "she incorporates her own life experiences …to make it real and relatable." One student also sent an email saying she really enjoyed and appreciated my "unique style and humour." It should be noted though, that only a third of enrolled students attended the synchronous workshops each week. It was not possible to get explicit metalinguistic interpretations from those students once the semester had finished. Likewise, only a third of students responded to the end of

unit student evaluations. Anonymity prevents me knowing if these were the same students who attended the synchronous workshops.

While these formal measurements of success were affirming, they really meant very little to me. Like Uttamchandani (2020), I believe that we should not place too much emphasis on what unfolds as evidence of learning (i.e., the outcomes). We should, instead, re-imagine the possibilities and relations that are opened through collaborative intimate online classroom interaction. Ensuring a human element in audio and video recorded workshops is as important as the focus on knowledge production. It enhances the intersubjective experiences of both the teacher and the students. This may, in turn, facilitate deeper connection and learning. Of course, all participants need to feel reassured that they are in a safe space and, while humor can create a pedagogical safe house (Canagarajah, 2004; Pomerantz & Bell, 2011), there is also the potential "dark side" of humor; a "double-edged sword" with the power both to include and to exclude (Rogerson-Revell, 2007, p. 24). There need to be guarantees, therefore, that the events in online workshops will be carefully monitored and safeguarded for privacy.

There is much potential for intimacy in online educational settings when timelines, formats, and obsessions with measurability, standardization, and homogenization (Lapidaki, 2020) are relegated to the back benches. Ridding ourselves of these would have clear pedagogic implications (O'Regan, 2003), including a re-humanizing of lecturers and students and their intersubjective experiences (Gilmore & Warren, 2007) at a time when students are at their most precarious, uncertain, and unsafe. These online experiences may even result in students utilizing their full linguistic repertoires to good effect in offline spaces (Yin et al., 2021). Central to this is the endorsement of language play, storytelling, and the consideration of material ecologies in online learning and teaching.

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