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What do we know about YouTube content about academic writing? A multimodal analysis

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ABSTRACT

The provision of academic language and literacy (ALL) support is increasingly shaped by the digital university and the commercialisation of higher education. This article undertakes a multimodal discourse analysis of YouTube content about ALL, turning critical attention to digital videos created by ALL practitioners and university students. Using an academic literacies framework and a schema of YouTube presenter and hosting styles, this article considers the discursive features that shape the digital videos' messages, the multimodal features that shape their visual organisation, and the external factors that appear to influence their creation. While the 'unbundled university' refers to the disaggregation of higher education into its different components, usually by for-profit educational companies, this emerging concept may be equally relevant to publicly available YouTube content about ALL. This study's findings raise questions about the degree to which YouTube content seeking to support students' ALL development represents an extension of the unbundled university.

Introduction

Today, if a student goes to YouTube and types 'how do I write an essay?', a variety of relevant digital content becomes available. As Benzie and Harper (2020, 634) observe,

> [A]ny student with an internet connection can access online a wide variety of writing and referencing resources, and tools for improving and editing writing. This advice is diverse, and often contradictory depending on the context for which it has been produced.

University lecturers and academic language and literacy (ALL) practitioners may use this query to seek out similar content, evaluate its accuracy and efficacy, and integrate it into their teaching and learning.

While university learning support and instruction in academic writing is increasingly being delivered through digital educational resources (e.g., Smith 2019) and online platforms (Barber 2020; Benzie and Harper 2020; Kwak 2017), students are finding digital alternatives on social media, which likely sit outside of universities' control. Content creators, including university employees and students, make digital videos in a prominent YouTube subgenre dedicated to ALL. Some YouTube channels are produced by universities, while others are created by social media influencers within a peer-to-peer sub-subgenre described as the 'StudyTube' community.

As Lucinda Dodd describes, '"StudyTube" is the rapidly growing corner of YouTube where many of your peers are turning for advice from fellow fresh-faced teenagers and twentysomethings' (Dodd 2020). These YouTube content creators seek not to outsource academic writing to generative artificial intelligence but rather to establish a community of writers, which necessarily makes their approach distinctive and noteworthy.

YouTube is part of the evolution of ALL support for university study. Despite constituting a subgenre that is here to stay, not enough is known about the current phenomena in the field of educational research. Indeed, there has been little research to date that explores YouTube content about ALL. This article critically examines the multimodal messages in a sample of YouTube content created by ALL practitioners and university students to explore ALL in the digital university. We specifically address these Research Questions:

1. What discursive features shape the messages about ALL in this YouTube content?
2. What multimodal features shape the visual organisation of this YouTube content?
3. What other factors appear to impact the creation of this YouTube content?

Literature review

Supporting the development of students' academic language and literacies (ALL) in the digital university

The digital university is a system of higher education that is shaped by neoliberalism and the opportunities and challenges of digital technologies (Johnston, MacNeill, and Smyth 2019). Digital infrastructure requires constant upgrades to deliver and manage teaching and learning; it may be developed internally, through online learning environments and Learning Management Systems (LMS), or externally, through online learning platforms delivered by private, for-profit companies (McCowan 2017; Morris et al. 2020). As Selwyn (2015, 237) contends:

> [D]igital education … demand[s] increased levels of self-dependence and entrepreneurial thinking on the part of the individual [student], with educational success dependent primarily on the individual's ability to self-direct their ongoing engagement with learning through various preferred forms of digital technology.

In the twenty-first century, student learning involves an ever-widening array of academic and digital literacies (Lea and Jones 2011). While some scholars argue that the shift from analogue to digital technologies in higher education can be overstated (Gourlay and Oliver 2018), the digital university's infrastructure still influences teaching and learning. Students routinely encounter myriad text-types (i.e., written, verbal, and multimodal), genres, and means of technological mediation (Lea and Jones 2011); many are appreciative of multiple modes of engagement but can become overwhelmed by the variety of choices that digital technology affords (Barden and Bygroves 2018). Students undertaking online learning may also hope to cultivate authentic relationships with university educators, feeling most engaged with lecturers who successfully transcend the online learning environment by fostering a sense of authenticity (O'Shea, Stone, and Delahunty 2015).

Delivering ALL support within universities is notoriously challenging, partly because impoverished understandings of academic literacies drive reductive 'study skills' and 'bolt-on' approaches that situate ALL beyond the curriculum (Lea and Street 1998; Wingate 2006). Rather than learning a set of atomised academic skills, we work with Lea and Street's (1998) nested model of Academic Literacies, viewing 'study skills' as insufficient because students benefit from developing a set of academic literacy practices that socialise students to reading and writing within the disciplines, as well as considering their authorial identities, epistemology, and power relations. Yet embedding academic literacies across the curriculum generates time and resource constraints (Benzie, Pryce, and Smith 2017), creating tensions between administrative priorities and students' needs (Gurney and Grossi 2019). Massification and diversification have exacerbated these challenges, fuelling the fragmentation of ALL support and foundational instruction in academic writing (Kwak 2017; Percy 2014).

Academic literacies scholarship has transformed as the spheres of meaning-making in higher education expand because of digital technologies (Lea and Jones 2011). Technology-enhanced Academic Language Support (TALS) sometimes operates in tandem with face-to-face learning support to extend or expand ALL provision (Smith 2019). Many universities, however, have responded by outsourcing ALL provision to third-party companies, such as Studiosity (Barber 2020; Benzie and Harper 2020), suggesting that neoliberal imperatives to reduce cost and devolve responsibility are as rife in academic support as they are in other parts of higher education.

YouTube and higher education

First launched in 2005, YouTube is a popular global social media platform. Described as a 'participatory community' for content aggregation (Burgess and Green 2018), YouTube has experienced rapid growth in both users and content through three levels of participation: non-members can view videos; account holders can engage with videos through ratings, comments, and channel subscriptions; and channel creators can upload videos and metadata, create channel pages, and engage with other videos (Benson 2016). All users can participate in the YouTube community, but only channel creators create content for the host platform (Burgess and Green 2018).

Various factors influence the popularity of YouTube channels. The vlog (a portmanteau of 'video' and 'blog') is one of the most common hosting styles, characterised by a content creator addressing the camera directly (Benson 2016). Welbourne and Grant's (2016) study of science communication on YouTube observed (1) user-generated content (UGC) developed by the platform's users and consumers and (2) professionally generated content (PGC). These authors conclude that UGC has greater popularity despite PGC being more numerous. A channel with a regular host can also generate a sense of authenticity (Burgess and Green 2018). As Welbourne and Grant (2016, 716) conclude: 'The biggest mistake that content creators can make is in viewing *YouTube* as merely a video hosting platform, rather than a participatory community'.

Increasingly, YouTube is used as a digital educational resource in the digital university. Tan (2013) contends that YouTube represents an informal learning environment where education and enjoyment is driven by students' choice. Tan's study identified that university students held positive attitudes toward YouTube's capacity to support independent learning. Despite unanimous uptake, some felt confident to identify additional YouTube content whereas others preferred peer recommendations. The challenge beyond the classroom, Tan (2013) suggests, is the need to scaffold digital literacy within informal learning environments without compromising students' autonomy, self-direction, and enjoyment.

Since most YouTube content is publicly available, some content creators may seek advertising revenue or sponsorship. The YouTube Partner Programme permits content creators with a set minimum amount of channel subscribers and content 'watchtime' to embed advertising into their content (Kopf 2020). Stubb, Nyström, and Colliander (2019) identify how successful content creators can engage in partnerships with brands, although some struggle to incorporate sponsorship disclaimers that meet the needs of both the brand sponsor and their YouTube community. What implications these commercial factors may have for student learning remain unclear; nevertheless, tacit product placement in YouTube content that is being used for teaching and learning relates to broader trends regarding the commercialisation of higher education.

The 'unbundled university' and educational commercialisation

The emerging concept of the 'unbundled university' refers to the disaggregation of a 'bundled' higher education experience into discrete components (Craig 2015; Swinnerton et al. 2020). These components may include curriculum and pedagogy, ALL support, accommodation services, co-curricular activities, digital technology, student services, and research (Craig 2015; O'Connor 2022). Components perceived to be superfluous may be abolished; others may only be available

for purchase (McCowan 2017). Alongside the accelerating influence of digital technology, 'unbundling is not merely an educational concept but also a technological and corporate one' (Swinnerton et al. 2020, 22). The private multinational companies that deliver the requisite technology often support educational commercialisation (Selwyn 2015).

The process of unbundling can occur through partnerships between universities and Online Programme Management companies (OPMs) which provide the technology to support online learning for credit-bearing degree programs (O'Connor 2022; Vujnovic and Foster 2022). For-profit educational companies identify and exploit commercial gaps in the 'higher education market' (Vujnovic and Foster 2022). Universities engage commercial providers of third-party services to support students' ALL development through distributed online learning environments: (1) *machine-based tools* that use natural-language-processing algorithms to assess and provide feedback about errors in student writing based on dictionaries, style guides, and writing corpora (e.g., Grammarly); (2) *content-based programs* that deliver self-paced short courses about academic writing, often through Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs), with minimal individualised feedback (e.g., Coursera, edX, and FutureLearn); and (3) *person-based services* that connect students with tutors who offer feedback about their writing via online platforms (e.g., Studiosity and SmartThinking) (Benzie and Harper 2020).[1] Across all three categories, Benzie and Harper (2020) conclude that the advice students receive about academic writing is disconnected from the sociocultural and political contexts of writing.

The commercialisation of higher education raises important questions about whether higher education is a public good and what constitutes universities' core business (Swartz et al. 2019). This raises questions about whether YouTube content that seeks to support students' ALL development is an extension of the unbundling process. Both implicit and explicit messages about academic writing are present in these digital videos: often, core messages exist somewhere between word, text, and image, as well as between the webpage and branding.

Methodology

This article reports on a digital ethnographic inquiry exploring how digital engagement with academic writing YouTube content is constructed online and what this can tell us about ALL and the 'unbundled university'. Digital technology was used to identify the sample, collect the data, and process the dataset. Thus, digital ethnography offers a flexible research method that is responsive to variety in both data collection and digital cultures (Kaur-Gill and Dutta 2017).

This approach is ontologically congruent for participants in higher education; as educators and students, we now live our lives and conduct our teaching and learning online and offline. Epistemologically, this methodology views both as sites of knowledge and knowledge production which share different and blended modalities and affordances. Key to these ideas is self-identity (including anonymity) and the indistinct parameters of public versus private in the digital world (Kaur-Gill and Dutta 2017). Therefore, digital ethnographic research that is situated in the online world offers forms of knowledge that are equally valid to those gathered and examined from the offline world. As inhabitants in and users of online and offline spaces, researchers can actively embrace insider familiarity with both to broker their interpretations.

Today, many university educators use YouTube as a source of digital educational resources. As researchers with ALL practitioner experience, our interest arose because digital videos about ALL regularly augment teaching and learning, in the physical or digital classroom, both synchronously and asynchronously.

Research design

The dataset encompasses four digital videos about ALL. Although YouTube search results are influenced by location and search history, many digital videos and YouTube channels about ALL become available to users who type the query 'how do I write an essay?' into the search bar.

Four relevant YouTube channels became the site of secondary data collection between July and November 2022.

Sample of videos

The specific inclusion criteria for a purposeful, non-random sample were threefold. The selected digital videos (1) address students' ALL development in higher education; (2) are delivered in English and therefore of relevance to English as a medium of instruction; and (3) are more concerned with ALL practices (specifically 'academic writing') rather than English language acquisition. Digital videos were selected based on their relevance to ALL development.

To offer different perspectives, the sample includes pairs of digital videos from YouTube content creators who are differently positioned within the higher education sector: (1) ALL practitioners; and (2) university students. The sample are shared via YouTube and categorised as part of two broad communities: (1) university-produced videos, which may contribute to multi-channel strategies that maximise the reach of ALL content; and (2) the 'StudyTube' community. The sample incorporates male and female presenters; all appear to have white ethnic backgrounds. While two content creators are based in Australia and two are based in Britain, it remains appropriate to analyse these digital videos in tandem because all YouTube content attains discoverability by generating an audience through networked interactions (Susarla, Oh, and Tan 2012). Popularity was not considered, either based on number of views or a YouTube channel's number of subscribers, but all have attracted many thousands of user views. As this YouTube content is publicly available and all the presenters are adults, ethical approval was not pursued; however, content creators were contacted about this study, and the presenters of Videos 1 and 2 explicitly consented. This sample is conceivably available to any English-speaking student with internet access across the globe.

Finally, each digital video engages with academic writing for a 'basic academic essay'. This genre refers to a style of essay that Kwak (2017) observes as prevalent in MOOCs about academic writing: the 'hamburger essay', or an essay that includes an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion, with heavily structured paragraphs. We acknowledge that this terminology is contested and does not incorporate the disciplinary differentiation in academic writing that is at the foundation of an academic literacies approach (Lea and Street 1998) (Table 1).

Higher education videos

Video 1

The first YouTube channel, *Academic Language and Literacy*, is affiliated with a Group of Eight[2] university in Australia. Established in 2014, its host is an ALL adviser and educational researcher.

Table 1. Dataset from YouTube.

Video #	YouTube Channel	Focus of video	Presenter	Date	Length (mins)	# of views
Higher education sector						
Video 1	*Lynette Pretorius: Academic Language and Literacy*	'Basic structure of a written university assignment'	Dr Lynette Pretorius, ALL Adviser and researcher	2014	5.03	2,500
Video 2	*Academic Skills*	'Voice in Academic Writing'	Steven Thurlow, Academic Skills Advisor	2020	6.17	9,200
'StudyTube' community						
Video 3	*Ruby Granger*	'how to write first class essays || write an essay with me'	Ruby Granger (YouTuber)	2020	14.33	101,500
Video 4	*UnJaded Jade*	'Write An Essay With Me in 4 Hours | Study With Me At University'	Jade Bowler (YouTuber)	2021	13.43	90,500

As of November 2022, this YouTube channel had over 7170 subscribers and over 80 digital videos. It continues to produce new content aimed at the University's students. Video 1 is standalone, but it also sits within a series on this YouTube channel.

Video 2

The second YouTube channel is *Academic Skills*, which is affiliated with a different Group of Eight university in Australia. Established in 2014, its hosts are learning advisors, lecturers, and students. The presenter of the digital video under analysis is an academic skills adviser. As of November 2022, this YouTube channel had over 21,900 subscribers and over 140 digital videos. It continues to produce new content aimed at the University's students.

'StudyTube' videos

Video 3

The third YouTube channel, *Ruby Granger*, was established in 2015. The presenter specialises in YouTube content about study, productivity, tea, and anti-bullying. At the time of production in 2020, Granger was an undergraduate student at a Russell Group[3] university in the UK. Video 3 is sponsored by Studiosity, a third-party product that provides universities with digital services relating to academic writing support (Benzie and Harper 2020). As of November 2022, this YouTube channel had 743,000 subscribers and over 500 digital videos. It continues to produce new content aimed at fellow students.

Video 4

The fourth YouTube channel, *UnJaded Jade*, was established in 2017. The presenter specialises in YouTube content about academia, self-growth, positivity, and veganism. At the time of production in 2021, Bowler was an undergraduate student at a private global international university. As of November 2022, this YouTube channel had 826,000 subscribers and over 500 digital videos. It continues to produce new content aimed at fellow students.

Analysis

Multimodal discourse analysis

Multimodality enables us to know more about how these digital videos construct meaning about ALL. According to Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran (2016), the significance of multimodality became evident as digital technology became more prevalent. A multimodal analysis should be attentive to meaning making across different semiotics and therefore attuned to myriad semiotic features, including (but not limited to) design, image, music, speech, symbolism, text, and writing (Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran 2016).

YouTube is a particularly important website for multimodal studies because it is inherently digital (Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran 2016) and encapsulates the complexity of multimodality as both social media and mediated social interaction (Benson 2015; 2016). Each YouTube channel is an example of a content creator (or series of content creators) embracing the platform's capacity to host user-generated content (Benson 2016; Burgess and Green 2018).

More specifically, multimodal discourse analysis focuses upon the multimodality of all discourse, with a particular emphasis on new media technologies (Benson 2016). For example, whereas discourse analysis may focus principally on meaning in YouTube content (Burgess and Green 2018), the technological and cultural significance of the social media platform lies in the 'various semiotic modes [that] work together to make up the text of the YouTube page' (Benson 2015, 83). A multimodal discourse analysis of YouTube therefore explores the connections between all multimodal aspects of a text, including the discursive and visual semiotics (Benson 2016).

Analytic process

The data analysis of the digital videos' discursive semiotics focused on the transcripts. This was informed by Lea and Street's (1998) conceptualisation of academic literacies: (1) the *study skills model* situates literacy as a series of atomised, transferrable skills; (2) the *academic socialisation model* envisions educators as introducing students to an academic culture; and (3) the *academic literacies model* accepts that a variety of literacy practices exist across the disciplines which students may find difficult to master. This study investigates the extent to which each digital video draws upon each model.

The data analysis of visual semiotics focused on the digital videos' screenshots. This was informed by Welbourne and Grant's (2016) overview of YouTube presenter and hosting styles. This study identifies six major presenter styles: (1) *vlog*, a presenter addresses the camera; (2) *hosted*, a presenter delivers information, sometimes with others; (3) *interview*, an interviewee responds to off camera questioning; (4) *presentation*, delivered to an audience; (5) *voice over visuals*, a voiceover accompanies visuals; and (6) *text over visuals*, text accompanies visuals. This study also observes three common hosting styles: a *continuous host* is always the same; a *mostly continuous host* is mostly the same; and a *mostly non-continuous host* is mostly different (Welbourne and Grant 2016). Each has implications for the perceived effectiveness and popularity of YouTube content.

Quotations are drawn from the dataset's transcripts of the digital videos. The figures are screen captures from the YouTube channels. The captions offer contextual information about the presenter and hosting styles, as well as detail about content, camera angles, and timestamp.

Limitations

We do not suggest that the sample is representative of the diverse formats or purposes of YouTube content about ALL, nor does it capture the increasing innovation and multimodality of content creation. Future research could identify a larger sample of digital videos from a more diverse array of content creators' YouTube channels.

Findings

Multimodal discourse analysis offers critical attention towards the dataset's messages about ALL, focusing on design, music, speech, symbolism, text, and writing.

Multimodal discourse analysis of the scripts of the ALL-focused YouTube videos

Each digital video describes approaches to academic writing that may contribute to producing a basic academic essay.

Study skills model

Video 1 and Video 2 outline the atomised skills that underpin a basic academic essay. As Video 1 asserts:

> [W]hat matters most to your markers are a good writing style, an argument justified with appropriate evidence, content that actually answers the question, and a clearly and logically structured argument (Pretorius).

The study skills model also extends to the technical and instrumental aspects of academic writing. Video 2 explores a student writer's 'voice in academic writing,' including: the student's own 'personal voice'; the 'direct voice of a source'; and the 'indirect voice of a source' (Figure 1). This presenter later cautions that 'direct quotations should make up less than 10 per cent of your work' (Thurlow). 'Voice' also extends to first versus third person perspective in academic writing:

Figure 1. Video 2 identifies three 'voices' in academic writing (screen capture) [0.52].

> For most academic texts, your own voice is the most important and doesn't necessarily need to be indicated with I, me, or my. In fact, many disciplines avoid these personal pronouns altogether (Thurlow).

Although Video 2 acknowledges that disciplinary differentiation exists, the presenter does not explore which disciplines this may relate to or why.

Video 3 distinguishes between 'formal' and 'informal' writing, noting that the former constitutes academic writing. When this presenter submits their academic essay to Studiosity (see further below), they request feedback about 'structure, choice of language, and spelling and grammar' (Granger). Studiosity's written feedback emphasises that academic writing should avoid personal pronouns while maintaining objectivity and a level of formality. For example, Video 3 summarises the feedback received from Studiosity.[4] Explicit reference to 'skills' occurs in Video 4 alongside speaking about the disciplines. This presenter describes the electives in their multidisciplinary undergraduate degree (neuroscience, business, and liberal arts) as offering the opportunity to develop the 'skills I want to improve' (Bowler). Describing themselves as 'very poor at defending my own argument,' this presenter hopes that a philosophy elective will offer the opportunity to 'get better at that skill' (Bowler).

Academic socialisation model

The academic socialisation model is far more prevalent across the dataset. Each digital video focuses on the student writer and student writing. The description that Video 1 gives about writing a basic academic essay aligns with inducting students into a new academic culture:

> [A]t university, you are not just writing a descriptive style of writing, but you are following analytical writing. … You are identifying the significance of a topic, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses, weighing up one piece of information over the other … to make a reasoned judgement (Pretorius).

Both Video 1 and Video 2 seek to orientate students into the world of the university, including ALL practices.

Video 3 and Video 4 develop a student-centred approach to academic socialisation by orientating YouTube users toward academic learning, including ALL practices. The presenter in Video 3 describes the importance of understanding the assessment task: 'One thing which is so easy to do is go off on a tangent and end up not actually answering the question' (Granger). This presenter

also suggests strategies for making academic writing 'manageable … because essays are daunting' (Granger), including an essay plan and reading the draft aloud to support proofreading and ensure the writing is engaging.

Academic literacies model

Any degree of disciplinary specificity occurs only in passing across the dataset. Whereas Video 1 does not mention scholarly disciplines at all, Video 2 explicitly describes exemplars from architecture and management. Video 3 implicitly indicates the discipline of English literature, as the presenter states: 'I've decided to focus [my essay] on *Huckleberry Finn*' (Granger). Video 4 explicitly identifies philosophy, as the presenter undertakes an in-depth discussion about philosophical concepts such as moral relativism, but without reference to how this may have shaped their academic writing.

Variety across the dataset may implicitly indicate the existence of different disciplinary traditions. Further discussion about the significance of these differences does not transpire, however. These digital videos do not engage with the more situated, discipline-specific approaches to ALL that define the academic literacies model.[5] Crucially, there is an absence of discussion about differences in institutional ALL practices across higher education.

Multimodal analysis of the composition and content of the ALL-focused YouTube videos

Each digital video visualises approaches to academic writing that may contribute to producing a basic academic essay.

Hosting and presenter styles

The hosting style in Video 1 is that of a presentation (Figure 2). Visually, the design includes a video of the presenter in a small box at the top left-hand corner of the frame, with a *Microsoft PowerPoint* screen capture covering two thirds of the frame. While this hosting style emulates voice over visuals, the digital video's post-production precludes this style being achieved completely.

The hosting style in Video 2 is a mix between a presentation and voice over visuals. The design features the presenter at medium closeup in full frame towards the beginning and end; however, the

Figure 2. Video 1 features a continuous host and visualises percentages for each section of a basic academic essay (medium closeup, screen capture) [0.19].

design for most of Video 2 is a full frame of the *Microsoft PowerPoint* screen capture that supports the voice over visuals.
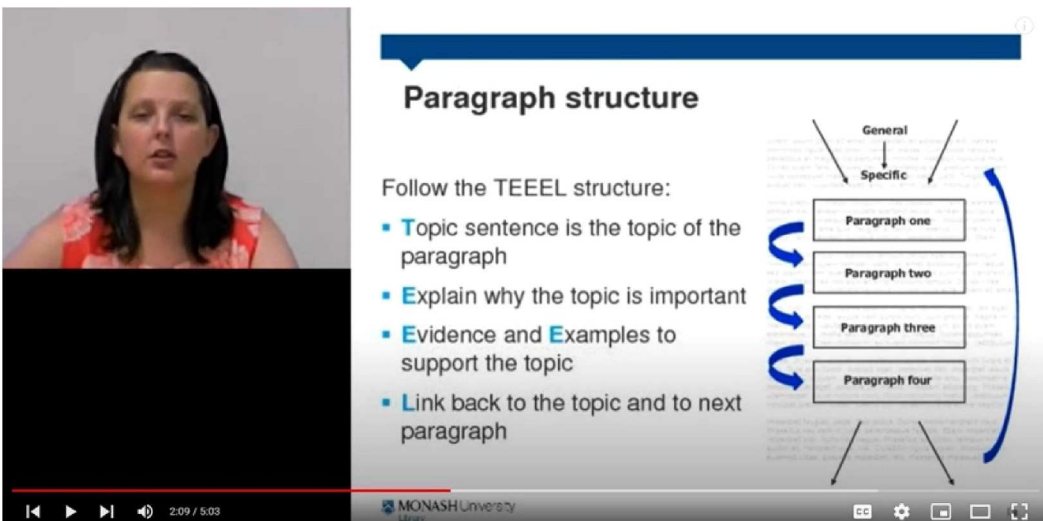
In contrast, both Video 3 and Video 4 feature a continuous host in the style of a vlog. This involves alternating between a focus on the presenters, at a variety of speeds and camera angles, as well as their notebooks, laptops, and screen captures. The delivery of speech is far more rapid than Video 1 and Video 2. These presenters cultivate high levels of familiarity with YouTube users through frequent closeup camera angles, direct eye contact, and expressive greetings. For example, Video 3 features a medium closeup centered on the presenter, who offers a warm and familiar verbal salutation, and Video 4 features the presenter waving to the camera. Both presenters use the vlog hosting style, welcoming users from their bedrooms.[6] This hosting style generates intimacy and, thus, authenticity.

Multimodal messages

Across the dataset, some visual messages explicitly reiterate the discursive messages. Others are not always present discursively and may sometimes only be implicit visually. Using sequential arrows as symbolism, Video 1 uses a flow chart to visualise the recommended percentiles for an academic essay's structure and the TEEEL paragraph structure (Figure 3).

Video 2 visualises textual exemplars to clarify the presenter's description of the different tiers of 'voice' in academic writing discursively and visually through a design featuring colours: 'personal voice' is green; the 'direct voice of a source' is brown; and the 'indirect voice of a source' is purple (Figure 4). The textual connection between 'sources' and referencing conventions are implicit, however, as APA in-text referencing appears without an accompanying reference list.

Video 1 does not incorporate music. Video 2 includes background music very briefly in its introduction and conclusion. Music is interspersed to far greater effect in Video 3 and Video 4. Both incorporate background music, but Video 4 generates additional authenticity when the presenter uses familiar actions to generate a sense of community when she dances to this music.[7] Video 3 also incorporates diegetic music from Apple iTunes. The presenter plays 'Greensleeves' to accompany their study session.

Figure 3. Video 1 visualises the TEEEL (Topic structure, Explanation, Evidence, Examples, Link) paragraph structure (medium closeup, screen capture) [2.08].
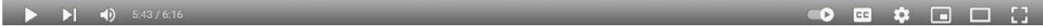
Figure 4. Video 2 uses colours to denote different 'voices' (screen capture) [5.43].

Modelling multimodal modes of writing

Video 1 and Video 2 do not reveal the processes behind creating the *Microsoft PowerPoint* presentations that are embedded in their YouTube content as screenshots. In contrast, Video 3 and Video 4 model the variety of textual and digital practices of twenty-first-century university students, including the use of analogue and digital tools for academic writing and study management. The multimodality of YouTube mirrors these presenters' ALL practices, including writing mind maps,[8] class notes, and to-do lists, and manipulating calendars and digital hardware and software. Both presenters move seamlessly between laptop, pen, and paper,[9] using websites and software to gather and organise information. Video 3 concludes with its presenter signing off by using analogue tools to write their name on marbled paper using a quill and ink.[10]

Traces of other factors across the dataset

Each digital video operates in tandem with the commercialisation of the digital university, albeit to differing degrees. Video 1, Video 3, and Video 4 exhibit the characteristics of UGC, whereas Video 2 exhibits the characteristics of PGC (Welbourne and Grant 2016). Video 3 and Video 4 appear to be mostly recorded using a hand-held electronic device generating myriad closeups which reiterate a sense of intimacy and authenticity.

University logos

Video 1 and Video 2 use symbolism to denote their affiliation with prominent Australian universities within the Group of Eight via university logos. This connection is far more implicit in Video 1, where the logo is relatively small at the centre-bottom of the frame (Figure 1). While 'Copyright [Name] University' appears beneath Video 1 on its YouTube channel, its 'About' section does not clearly reiterate the affiliation. Far more overt university branding is evident in Video 2. The university logo is extremely prominent in almost every frame, but particularly at the beginning and end. These high production values and explicit connection to commercial branding are characteristic of PGC (Welbourne and Grant 2016).

Sponsorship compensation

Video 3 explicitly identifies Studiosity as its sponsor in speech and text. Describing this third-party product's services, this presenter states:

> This video is … very kindly sponsored by Studiosity [,] … a 24-7 on demand platform for students where you can get help from subject specialists and people who are very familiar with academic writing. There is a connect live service, but the really cool thing is their essay feedback service so you can submit an essay and then get feedback on your essay (Video 3).

The presenter also emphasises that 'loads of university students have access to Studiosity without realising it' (Granger), modelling how to access the website using the Google search engine in a Google Chrome browser. At the end of Video 3, the presenter submits their academic essay to Studiosity, saying: '[T]he number one thing which is important when it comes to essays is getting feedback and seeing how you can improve next time and Studiosity is a great way to do this' (Granger). The presenter reiterates Video 3's sponsorship by overlaying text as a written annotation (Benson 2016). The presenter receives Studiosity's feedback within two hours rather than the expected 24-hour response time. To make this feedback actionable, the presenter summarises their interpretation thereof. Video 3 uses YouTube's multimodal capabilities to reiterate its sponsorship from Studiosity, with text that reads "*click on my link in the description to learn more! studiosity.com/rubygranger*" being superimposed over the video.[11]

Video 3 and Video 4 integrate a series of other products both discursively and visually. The calming study environments that these presenters develop to accompany their academic writing and study sessions clearly feature images of branded products, including homewares. The presenter in Video 3 describes beginning her day: 'I'm also going to light this new candle: pumpkin scented, which is wonderful' (Granger). The closeup in Video 3 visually reveals product placement, with its brand revealed to be American Home by Yankee Candle.[12]

Video 3 and Video 4 also feature images of stationery that is used for brainstorming and notetaking. The image of the stationery is almost always accompanied by speech identifying its brand. The presenter in Video 3 says: 'I will just take out my [brand] note paper' (Granger). This presenter also describes how they use an 'Academic Planner' (Granger). Although the exact provenance of this stationery is not evident in Video 3, the YouTube channel's multimodality offers additional context. The 'About' section includes a hyperlink via the word 'Shop' to the presenter's sales website. Querying 'Academic Planner' in this website's search bar results in a series of purchase options, including images of stationery that is identical to – and photographs taken at the same desk as – that which appears in Video 3.

Video 4 uses images and speech to promote stationery and academic products even more explicitly. This presenter states: 'This is your week [*sic*] weekly planner by my friend Jack Edwards'. Indeed, Video 4 features a medium closeup of the presenter holding stationery affiliated with a fellow 'StudyTube' content creator.[13] Journalism about the StudyTube community reveals that Edwards is another prominent YouTube content creator (Dodd 2020). Additionally, the presenter in Video 4 refers to and summarises content from their own book (Bowler 2021a).

Digital hardware and software are also prevalent in Video 3 and Video 4, especially images of Apple and Google products. Both feature MacBooks as the principal electronic devices; the presenters also describe using notetaking platform Notion. Images in Video 3 feature Google as the main search engine and Google Chrome as the main browser, as well as Google Books, Google Drive, and Apple iTunes. This presenter describes one of the reasons they engage with this variety of software to brainstorm and format an academic essay: 'I don't have [Microsoft] Word' (Granger). Images in Video 4 also feature Google Calendar.

Discussion

What multimodal features shape these digital videos' messages about ALL?

Through a focus on the discursive semiotic features of speech, text, and writing, the three tiers of the academic literacies model are observed across the dataset, including in absence (Lea and Street

1998). Video 1 and Video 2 describe academic literacy practices that are commonly conveyed to student writers at university. Video 3 and Video 4 integrate writing an academic essay into the everyday experience of being a student. If engagement with YouTube content about ALL is driven by students' choice, then this may cultivate education and enjoyment (Tan 2013). Being available primarily on a largely unregulated social media platform nevertheless renders the advice about ALL disconnected from the sociocultural and political contexts of students' writing (Benzie and Harper 2020).

These digital videos largely transcend the study skills model's most rudimentary ALL practices. Critical attention to the transcripts reveals infrequent reference to the word 'skills'. The academic socialisation model is most evident because the digital videos introduce a new academic culture, explore the academic essay as an assessment task, and orientate YouTube users into being a student. The digital videos do not quite approach the academic literacies model. While Video 1 and Video 2 have been produced by ALL professionals and are affiliated with Australian universities, these are not specifically examples of what Smith (2019) describes as TALS. In contrast, Video 3 and Video 4 have seemingly been produced with the primary (or major) aim of maintaining and expanding a YouTube channel. Despite acknowledging the specificities of academic writing, the dataset presents ALL practices that are fixed, formulaic, and not discipline-specific. These insights speak to the challenges derived from the whole-of-institution approach to embedding ALL (Benzie, Pryce, and Smith 2017), including tensions between administrative priorities and students' needs (Gurney and Grossi 2019).

YouTube content about ALL practices exists in the liminal digital worlds that Lea and Jones (2011, 380) describe as 'both within and at the boundaries of defined curriculum spaces'. While lecturers and ALL professionals may integrate these digital videos into an LMS, being hosted on *YouTube* essentially mirrors the 'bolt-on' approach of the study skills model (Wingate 2006). This teaching practice has the potential to convey that ALL support is perceived as superfluous for student learning (McCowan 2017) and may therefore be disaggregated from the central higher education experience (Swinnerton et al. 2020), and thus unbundled from the university.

What multimodal features shape these digital videos' visual organisation?

Through a focus on the visual semiotic features of design, music, speech, symbolism, text, and writing, different hosting styles across the dataset reflect findings about the varying popularity of *YouTube* content (Welbourne and Grant 2016). Video 1 and Video 2 visually prioritise flow charts and colour-coded paragraphs to identify and describe what are modelled as desirable ALL practices. In contrast, Video 3 and Video 4 use atmosphere to capture how students may feel about academic writing and the university experience more broadly.

The university educators in Video 1 and Video 2 are strictly presenters, whereas the vlogging and rapid speech delivery of the StudyTube community content creators in Video 3 and Video 4 reflects the greater popularity of YouTube content with rapid delivery (Welbourne and Grant 2016). Students' expectations about online learning would advantage the more frequent YouTube content creators, as regular hosting generates familiarity and authenticity (Burgess and Green 2018). These findings align with research suggesting that university students feel more engaged with those lecturers who successfully manage to transcend the online learning environment (O'Shea, Stone, and Delahunty 2015). The presenters in Video 3 and Video 4 cultivate recognisable online personas and brands by using multimodal features that mimic the social and intellectual connections that university students may seek from peers. YouTube users are welcomed to witness these presenters writing an academic essay at study desks in their bedrooms, alongside familiar greetings, funky or calming music, and candles.

Popularity was not a specific inclusion criterion; however, multimodality requires remaining attendant to all YouTube's semiotic modes (Benson 2015). Although thousands of user views have been accrued across the dataset, Video 1 or Video 2 had significantly fewer user views (and

channel subscribers) than Video 3 and Video 4. The presenters in Video 3 and Video 4 also model the multiplicity of analogue and digital textual practices of twenty-first-century university students (Barden and Bygroves 2018; Lea and Jones 2011), revealing the extent to which new academic and digital literacy practices shape student learning in the digital university (Lea and Jones 2011). Being hosted on YouTube illustrates that explicit and accessible ALL instruction may represent an unmet need in higher education even while being unbundled from the university.

What do commercial factors tell us about ALL in the digital videos?

Through a focus on the discursive and visual semiotic features of image, speech, symbolism, and text, YouTube content about ALL reflects the commercialisation of higher education and the unbundled university.[14] Video 1 and Video 2 (the only clear example of PCG) had significantly fewer YouTube user views than Video 3 and Video 4, which further aligns with findings about the greater popularity of UGC over PGC (Welbourne and Grant 2016).

The symbolism of university logos is apparent in Video 1 and Video 2, but these presenters do not examine institutionally sanctioned ALL practices. In contrast, Video 3 and Video 4 discursively and visually integrate a series of other branded products. Studiosity is clearly and repeatedly identified as Video 3's sponsor, yet the presence of homewares, stationery, and digital hardware and software implicitly suggests the possibility of additional sponsorship compensation.[15] The impression may be given that the key to success when writing an academic essay is planning and preparation using certain stationery, electronic devices, or word processing platforms. These products are compatible – practically and ideologically – with the YouTube content, making it conceivable that these products do not cause the tensions that Stubb, Nyström, and Colliander (2019) observe in some YouTube content creators' sponsorship compensation arrangements. This raises the likelihood that some content creators making YouTube content about ALL may be engaged in the YouTube Partner Programme and other external brand sponsorship (Burgess and Green 2018; Kopf 2020). Tacit product placement in YouTube content relating to academic writing by content creators who are university students thus extends the remit of commercialisation beyond the digital university.

The YouTube content in the dataset inherently operates – and remains available – beyond the confines of the institution. Although digital videos may be incorporated into an LMS, students may be just as likely to seek them out themselves (Tan 2013). Significant onus may therefore be placed upon students – as YouTube users – to locate, identify, and utilise the kinds of digital videos in the dataset in a manner that benefits their ALL development. This aligns with what Selwyn (2015) identifies as the discursive construction of digital education demanding self-dependence and entrepreneurial thinking from students. Hence, the increasingly distributed nature of support for students' ALL development via YouTube emphasises that the digital videos in the dataset have been unbundled from the university.

Conclusion

Within a changing higher education landscape, there remains a need for university students to be supported in their ALL development. Students want support and will actively seek it from wherever they can find it; the challenge for universities is that they might not control the messages, whether it be from YouTube or a commercial partner like Studiosity. This article has significantly expanded what educational researchers know about the digitalisation of academic language and literacy (ALL) practices on social media platforms, and what messages are foregrounded (and what commercial potential is possible or tacitly communicated). The dataset's multimodality reveals that the study skills model and academic socialisation model prevail, but the hosting styles of university-affiliated ALL practitioners do not capture YouTube users' imaginations to the same extent as the 'StudyTube' community. Sponsorship from educational corporations affects content creation

within the 'StudyTube' community, as does the possibility of additional, albeit implicit, sponsorship compensation arrangements.

Just as there is a need for lecturers and ALL practitioners to be aware of the advice that third-party products provide (Benzie and Harper 2020), this multimodal discourse analysis highlights that there is equally a need for greater awareness of the ALL practices being 'demonstrated' on *YouTube*. What is explicitly conveyed in digital videos about ALL may support and empower students through explicit instruction about academic writing and feelings of belonging at university. Yet, implicit messages may convey that students' ALL development should occur beyond the institutional practices of the university. This may take place in the context of the digital university, or it may equally be sequestered to the remit of the unbundled university.

Our article highlights the need for universities to develop better understandings of students' ALL support preferences, so they can help students to be more informed and agentic in how, from where, and from whom they seek support for academic writing. We therefore extend two recommendations. Firstly, universities should consult with students to find out what kinds of ALL support they access and what they would like to universities to provide. Secondly, training should be provided to lecturers to raise awareness about the forms of support that students are seeking, so that they can be better informed about the messages that students are receiving from YouTube about ALL. If universities are not more agentic with creating the content that students want, in the forms of media that they habitually digest, then they will lose the ability to shape teaching and learning about ALL in ways that align with their mission.

Notes

1. While not a focus of this research, generative artificial intelligence may become increasingly significant to this categorisation of machine-based tools.
2. The Group of Eight is a consortium of research-intensive universities describing itself as "Australia's Leading Universities, leading excellence, leading debate" (The Group of Eight 2023).
3. The Russell Group is a consortium of 24 research-intensive universities describing itself as having "huge social, economic and cultural impacts … across the UK and around the globe" (The Russell Group of Universities 2023).
4. See: (Granger 2020), 13.53, https://youtu.be/451w8Ab2fdE?si=GZl-z2Hkg7MXKhK6&t=833
5. Note: Video 1 is part of a longer series on its YouTube channel, so other ALL practices may be evident beyond the dataset.
6. See: (Granger 2020), 00.00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=451w8Ab2fdE; (Bowler 2021b), 0.03, https://youtu.be/fgYxWZMwaEE?si=F8OwJam4Zjbd6ZoV&t=3
7. See: (Bowler 2021b), 0.07, https://youtu.be/fgYxWZMwaEE?si=RxlYIIqTZP7C7Ddx&t=7
8. See: (Granger 2020), 2.52, https://youtu.be/451w8Ab2fdE?si=OYoGu87xuvGtfb8p&t=172
9. See: (Bowler 2021b), 3.40, https://youtu.be/fgYxWZMwaEE?si=F1JrojOmAYQdBW_D&t=220
10. See: (Granger 2020), 14.28, https://youtu.be/451w8Ab2fdE?si=rlRZ7ZTKV7s1MXkr&t=868
11. See: (Granger 2020), 13.30, https://youtu.be/451w8Ab2fdE?si=ZnJaeWMvCk03Q–5k&t=810
12. See: (Granger 2020), 0.48, https://youtu.be/451w8Ab2fdE?si=r7UjQuous0A7RnZI&t=48
13. See: (Bowler 2021b), 3.10, https://youtu.be/fgYxWZMwaEE?si=97P2PW7nDa8DGr91&t=190
14. Notably, university professionals are prevented from being able to monetise their YouTube channels.
15. Media reports confirm the existence of sponsorship compensation (e.g., Rumbelow 2018).

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