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THE DIALOGIC PARADOX: UNDERSTANDING HOW WRITING CENTRE TUTORS MAINTAIN COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN DIGITAL AND AI-MEDIATED TUTORING CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Writing centres have historically been grounded in collaborative, dialogic pedagogy premised on embodied co-presence, relational trust, and synchronous conversational exchange. The rapid expansion of digital tutoring platforms and the integration of generative artificial intelligence into higher education pose profound challenges to these commitments, raising urgent questions about whether collaborative pedagogy can be sustained under conditions of technological mediation. This qualitative case study examined the experiences of nine writing centre peer tutors at the Durban University of Technology in South Africa, employing semi-structured interviews analysed thematically through Bourdieu's conceptual framework of habitus, field, capital, and symbolic violence. Four interconnected themes emerged: tutors experienced profound disruption of their embodied pedagogical habitus in digital environments, losing access to the non-verbal communicative resources central to collaborative practice; infrastructural inequality in connectivity, devices, and data functioned as a gatekeeping form of capital, producing symbolic violence when structural disadvantage was misrecognised as individual disengagement; corporate platforms such as MS Teams actively reconfigured pedagogical authority, creating conditions more conducive to passive consumption than dialogic exchange; and tutors engaged in extensive, largely invisible compensatory affective and pedagogical labour to sustain collaborative relationships under constrained conditions. These findings carry significant implications for writing centre practice, institutional resourcing, and the politics of digital education in the Global South.

KEYWORDS: Affective Labour, Bourdieu, Collaborative Pedagogy, Digital Tutoring, Generative AI, South Africa, Symbolic Violence, Writing Centre.

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing centre pedagogy has long been grounded in theories of collaborative learning that position dialogue as central to the writing process. These foundational principles established writing centres as spaces where collaborative talk about writing enables students to develop as writers through relationships that honour their agency and voice. The genealogy of this pedagogical stance runs through influential scholarship that articulated collaborative learning as socially constructed knowledge production, where meaning emerges through conversation rather than transmission. Contemporary writing centre practice continues to enact these principles through active listening, strategic questioning, and commitment to producing "better writers, not better writing", distinctions that necessitate specific types of collaborative relationships between tutor and student (North, 2013:438). What becomes clear across this theoretical foundation is that collaborative, dialogic tutoring practice was always understood as relational in specific ways, requiring synchronous presence, embodied interaction, shared attention to physical texts, and sustained conversation.

The expansion of online writing labs (OWLs) over the past two decades (Korkmazgil, 2023; Huot & Hok, 2025) initially appeared to be primarily a matter of access and reach, with early scholarship maintaining optimistic stances that collaborative principles could successfully transfer across modalities. However, the COVID-19 pandemic's forced migration to entirely online tutoring revealed that digital mediation involves more than simple translation of established practices. Research examining the rapid transition documented how writing centres moved from predominantly face-to-face services to entirely online platforms within weeks, with tutors reporting difficulties maintaining the spontaneous conversational flow that characterises productive face-to-face tutorials (Hamby, 2023). Writing centre practitioners had to quickly learn best practices for synchronous and asynchronous platforms, navigating technological challenges while attempting to preserve the relational dynamics central to their pedagogy (Carlana & La Ferrara, 2021). Online tutoring also raises questions of inclusivity and universal design for learning, as institutions recognised that offering only in-person consultations limited flexibility and equity (Shotick, 2024).

For South African writing centres, these challenges intersected with distinctive material constraints. The assumption underlying much international scholarship on digital writing centres, that students and tutors possess reliable high-speed internet and appropriate devices, proved untenable within South African universities serving populations marked by profound economic inequality. Recent scholarship on South African writing centres emphasises how the COVID-19 pandemic "imposed on our daily practices and required a hasty re-evaluation of our service provision", foregrounding issues of multilingualism, discipline-based writing, social justice, and specialised tutor training (Rambiritch & Drennan, 2023:354). Language politics adds further complexity. South African universities operate within multilingual ecologies where English functions as the dominant academic medium even as most students and many tutors claim other languages as their first or home languages. Research highlights how writing centre peer tutors use multilingualism to disrupt monolingual practices, with tutors reporting that using students' familiar language creates a more inclusive and equitable learning environment (Namakula et al., 2025). Digital platforms, particularly when compromised by bandwidth limitations, constrain these multilingual resources, locking tutorials into English-medium written exchange. Research on decolonising South African writing centres further emphasises the need for "a sympathy for mass politics rather than elite politics, widening political participation, and the promotion of socio-economic equality" (Harrison, 2001:387). When technological mediation itself becomes a barrier, writing centres risk becoming agents of exclusion rather than inclusion.

If digital platforms challenge the material conditions of collaborative tutoring, generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools confront something perhaps more fundamental, namely the basic assumption that tutorials involve dialogue between human agents about texts that students themselves have composed. The release of ChatGPT in November 2022 renewed discussions about how AI would transform higher education, with rapid proliferation of scholarly attention to its implications for teaching, learning, and research (Chiu et al., 2024). Research examining early responses to ChatGPT reveals several recurring claims, with the technology generally framed as a catalyst for existing agendas including assessment reform, personalisation, and inclusion, though also presenting a positive perspective that may overlook deeper challenges (Jensen et al., 2025). Several scholars emphasise that writing is not merely the product of thinking but a form of thinking itself,

described as "a slow mode of thinking, an antidote to snap judgments" where writing struggles have purpose in promoting deeper cognition (Mills, 2023). Technologies that make writing easier thus risk leading to lower-quality thinking, particularly when students bypass the cognitive struggle that makes writing pedagogically valuable. Neuroimaging research has found that students who used generative AI for writing showed less brain activity, produced more homogeneous writing, and were less able to recall their written work (Kosmyna et al., 2025).

For writing centres specifically, AI-generated writing creates distinctive challenges that differ from previous concerns about plagiarism. When tutors suspect but cannot confirm AI use, sessions become exercises in negotiation around unspoken tensions. Writing centre literature emphasises the importance of maintaining trust and non-judgemental, student-centred relationships (Govender & Ndadziyira, 2023), yet confronting AI-generated work threatens to collapse the tutor's role from collaborative partner into surveillant gatekeeper. Moreover, AI tools trained on vast corpora reflecting dominant linguistic patterns and cultural perspectives function as assimilationist forces, pulling student writing towards standardised English and Western academic conventions precisely when writing centres seek to create space for linguistic and epistemological diversity (Namakula et al., 2025). The collision of digital mediation and AI tools creates compound challenges that exceed the sum of separate technological disruptions. Recent systematic reviews emphasise tensions between efficiency gains and concerns about overreliance, potentially leading to the outsourcing of critical thinking (Demir et al., 2025). Yet existing scholarship has largely treated digital tutoring and AI-generated writing as separate concerns, addressed in different literatures that rarely speak to each other. This fragmentation leaves crucial questions underexplored regarding how tutors experience the collision of pedagogical commitment with technological constraint, particularly in contexts shaped by infrastructural inequality and decolonial imperatives.

This study is guided by two central research questions: first, how can writing centre tutors preserve the collaborative, conversational pedagogy that characterises writing centre practice within digital tutoring environments; and second, what strategies do tutors use to establish rapport and sustain meaningful, dialogic engagement with students during online consultations. These questions are framed by a dialogic paradox in that writing centres have always navigated contradictions between institutional positioning and pedagogical commitments, and current AI-mediated technological transformations represent new manifestations of longstanding tensions rather than entirely unprecedented challenges. Set within a South African university context, configurations of linguistic diversity, resource inequality, and decolonial aspirations mean these questions carry distinct theoretical and political significance, as global technological shifts play out differently than in Global North institutions. The study contributes to this literature by demonstrating that digital mediation is not a neutral shift in delivery mode but a transformation of the pedagogical field itself, with significant implications for how institutions govern technology adoption, recognise tutor labour, and address infrastructural inequality.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to enable in-depth exploration of how writing centre tutors navigate collaborative relationships within digital and AI-mediated tutoring contexts. The qualitative orientation provided deep insights into patterns of technology use and tutor experiences (Creswell et al., 2007) and aligns with contemporary educational research that recognises the complexity of pedagogical practices in technology-enhanced learning environments. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Durban University of Technology Independent Research Ethics Committee prior to commencing data collection (Ethical Clearance Number: IN-IREC 045/25).

2.2. Participants And Sampling

The study participants comprised writing centre peer tutors from the Durban University of Technology. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure representation across different demographic groups, academic disciplines, and levels of technology engagement (Patton, 2022). This sampling strategy was particularly appropriate given the study's focus on understanding experiences within a specific institutional context. Nine tutors from one of the institution's five writing centres participated in the study, drawn from a total pool of 34 tutors across the institution. This sample provided both breadth and depth of perspective while preserving the bounded scope essential to case study research.

2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected between 15 and 22 October 2025. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all nine participants, each lasting approximately 120 minutes. This approach allowed for flexibility in exploring emergent themes while maintaining consistency across participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015), enabling participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms while ensuring that the core research questions were systematically addressed. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' explicit consent and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis. Bourdieu's analytical tools of habitus, field, capital, and symbolic violence were applied to analyse the data. The authors acknowledge the use of (Claude Sonnet 4.6) to assist in condensation of sections and language refinement. The tool was used solely to improve clarity, conciseness and structure of the manuscript text.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis informed by Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus of habitus, field, capital, and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). Transcripts were read and re-read iteratively, with initial codes generated inductively from participants' accounts before being organised into candidate themes. Themes were then reviewed and refined in relation to the theoretical framework and the two research questions. This theory-informed approach to thematic analysis allowed interpretive commentary to move between participants' experiences and established conceptual frameworks throughout the analytical process.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Bourdieu's social theory to examine how writing centre tutors navigate competing demands within transformed pedagogical spaces. The conceptual framework, particularly the concepts of habitus, field, capital, and symbolic violence, provides analytical tools for understanding how tutors' dispositions, institutional positioning, and resources intersect with the material and technological conditions of contemporary writing support (Bourdieu, 1990, 2020; Grenfell, 2014). This framework proves especially generative in the South African context, where ongoing efforts towards epistemic decolonisation intersect with persistent material inequalities (Jansen, 2019; Mbembe, 2016).

Central to this study is Bourdieu's concept of habitus, defined as systems of durable, transposable dispositions that structure practice without determining it mechanically (Bourdieu, 1990). For writing centre tutors, habitus encompasses the pedagogical values, interactional styles, and professional identities cultivated through training, dispositions that evolve through ongoing engagement with institutional contexts (Reay, 2016). In collaborative writing pedagogy, tutor habitus typically emphasises dialogic exchange, attentiveness to student voice, and the co-construction of meaning (Greenfield & Rowan, 2011), while retaining the capacity for adaptation in response to changing field conditions (Wacquant, 2016). This study investigates how these dispositions encounter the affordances and constraints of digital interfaces and AI-mediated writing, examining moments of continuity, tension, and transformation.

Bourdieu's concept of field describes semi-autonomous social spaces structured by specific pedagogical logics, power relations, and struggles over valued resources and legitimate practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The writing centre functions as a distinct field within higher education, historically defined by commitments to non-evaluative support, peer learning, and student-centred pedagogy (North, 2013; Grimm, 2009), yet intersecting with institutional priorities around retention, technological innovation, and disciplinary conventions (Lerner, 2009). In South Africa, additional pressures emerge from demands for curriculum decolonisation, multilingual pedagogy, and profound inequalities in students' prior educational experiences (Du Plessis, 2021). Digital and AI technologies reconfigure this field by altering tutoring interactions, introducing new mediation into the tutor-student relationship, and raising questions about the boundaries of legitimate practice.

Bourdieu's concept of capital in its various forms, namely economic, cultural, social, and symbolic, illuminates the resources tutors mobilise and the constraints they face (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital, encompassing educational credentials, linguistic competence, and familiarity with academic conventions, is a key pedagogical resource (Geller & Denny, 2024). Yet uneven distribution of technological and infrastructural resources in South Africa introduces additional inequalities (Adedokun & Zulu, 2022). Economic capital directly shapes access to digital tools and reliable connectivity (Joshi & Koirala, 2023), while social capital, understood as networks of institutional support and collegial relationships, enables tutors to develop collective strategies for navigating new contexts (Lin, 2002; Macauley & Mauriello, 2007).

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence offers a crucial lens for examining AI-mediated writing support, referring to the imposition of meanings that reinforce existing power relations through their apparent naturalness (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). When AI tools present specific linguistic patterns or rhetorical structures as self-evidently correct, they risk naturalising specific cultural conventions (Fowler, 2022), raising questions about whose literacies are valued and whose ways of meaning-making are marginalised (Govender, 2023). This concern is particularly salient given that South African higher education remains characterised by epistemic violence and Eurocentric hegemony, requiring efforts to rethink, reframe, and reconstruct the curriculum (Bertram, 2022). AI writing assistants predominantly trained on English-language corpora carry embedded assumptions about valued literacies, potentially reinforcing what scholars have termed "technological coloniality" (Bon et al., 2022). The #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements of 2015 and 2016 demanded that transformation address fundamental epistemic questions about what and whose knowledge is legitimised (Dlamini, 2022). A Bourdieusian perspective attuned to decolonial concerns therefore examines how tutors develop counter-hegemonic practices that resist both academic gatekeeping and the normalising functions of ostensibly neutral technologies, pursuing what Leibowitz (2017) terms "cognitive justice".

Bourdieu's practice theory, summarised in the formula "(habitus)(capital) + field = practice" (Bourdieu, 1990), refuses both structural determinism and voluntaristic accounts of agency. For writing centre tutors, this foregrounds the situated judgements, improvisational strategies, and reflexive adjustments through which pedagogical commitments are maintained under transformed conditions (Adkins & Skeggs, 2004; Cavazzoni et al., 2022). Digital mediation transforms relational possibilities, requiring tutor development oriented towards what Borgman and McArdle (2019) term PARS: Personal, Accessible, Responsive, and Strategic. Drawing these theoretical strands together, this study employs Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus to illuminate how writing centre tutors' practices emerge from the intersection of pedagogical habitus, institutional field dynamics, differential capital distribution, and the material-technological conditions of contemporary tutoring. Rather than treating digital and AI technologies as neutral tools, this framework examines how they reshape field logics, reconfigure capital resources, and generate new sites of symbolic struggle over legitimate pedagogical practice.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Durban University of Technology Independent Research Ethics Committee (Ethical Clearance Number: IN-IREC 045/25) prior to commencing data collection. Participants received written informed consent documentation that clearly articulated the research purposes, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights as research participants, with special attention to voluntary participation (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). Participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, communicated both in writing and verbally at the commencement of each data collection session.

Confidentiality was maintained through rigorous anonymisation of all data, with participants assigned pseudonyms (Tutors 1–9) and all identifying information removed from transcripts (Kaiser, 2009). Secure storage protocols were implemented for both digital and physical materials, including password-protected files and locked storage facilities with restricted access. The ethical handling of digital interaction data required careful attention to institutional data protection policies (Markham & Buchanan, 2012), and participants were assured that no recordings or digital traces would be collected without their explicit consent. Data access was restricted to the principal researcher, with encryption applied to all digital files. Regular ethical review of data collection processes ensured ongoing compliance and allowed for adjustments during implementation, reflecting a commitment to reflexive ethical practice throughout the study (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

3. RESULTS

This section presents findings from thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with nine writing centre peer tutors at the Durban University of Technology. Drawing on Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus of *habitus, field, capital,* and *symbolic violence*, the analysis interrogated tutors' experiences of digital and AI-mediated tutoring as sites of pedagogical struggle, adaptation, and transformation. Four themes emerged from iterative, theory-informed engagement with the transcript data. The first concerns the disruption of tutors' embodied pedagogical *habitus* when transposed to digital environments. The second addresses how infrastructural inequality in connectivity, devices, and data functions as a gatekeeping form of *capital*

that constrains meaningful participation. The third examines how corporate platforms actively reconfigure the writing centre *field* and the distribution of pedagogical authority within it. The fourth documents the extensive compensatory labour tutors perform to sustain collaborative pedagogy under these constrained conditions. Each theme is presented with supporting participant quotations, followed by close interpretive analysis of what the data reveals. Broader theoretical interpretation and engagement with the empirical literature are taken up in the Discussion that follows.

3.1. Theme 1: Embodied Pedagogical Habitus Encounters Digital Disruption

The most pervasive finding across tutor accounts concerns the profound disruption of embodied pedagogical knowledge when transposed to digital environments. Tutors consistently articulated experiences of pedagogical disorientation, describing collaborative tutoring techniques that depend fundamentally on bodily co-presence, multimodal communication, and spatial intimacy. This disruption manifests most acutely in tutors' loss of access to non-verbal communication, their inability to engage in demonstrative teaching, and their experience of what might be termed "dialogic blindness" in platform-mediated interaction. Tutor 1 captures this disruption with clarity.

"*When you are tutoring face to face, you are able to get those non-verbal cues from the students. You can tell if they're interested in the conversation or the discussion, they're engaging, something like that. But when you're tutoring online, you can't really pick some of those cues. So, some students at times you end up having to ask if are you still there? Are you still connected? Because they might log in and you find out that they're doing something else.*" *(Tutor 1)*

This extract reveals multiple dimensions of pedagogical transformation. First, Tutor 1 identifies non-verbal communication not as supplementary to dialogue but as constitutive of it. The ability to "tell if they're interested" suggests that collaborative pedagogy depends on constant, tacit assessment of student engagement through embodied signals. Second, the shift from reading bodies to asking "are you still there?" marks a fundamental change in epistemic access, moving from knowing through perception to knowing through verbal interrogation. Third, the possibility that students are "doing something else" introduces radical uncertainty about attention and presence that physical co-location largely forecloses. Tutor 6 reinforces and extends this.

"*It's harder to actually identify the student level of understanding... based on a physical session, that one is usually easier because we are able to tell if the student understands the content or the assignment. That can be through verbal or non-verbal cues such as eye contact, as well as body language and their facial expression.*" *(Tutor 6)*

The specificity here is instructive. The references to eye contact, body language, and facial expression constitute a repertoire of embodied signs that tutors have been trained to read as indices of comprehension (Kucuk, 2023). Tutor 6's phrase "we are able to tell" employs the collective "we," suggesting this is not idiosyncratic skill but shared professional knowledge within the writing centre community. The comparison between "harder" (online) and "easier" (face-to-face) consistently positions embodied literacy as the norm against which digital interaction is measured and found deficient. A second dimension of embodied disruption also emerged from the data, namely the difficulty of demonstrative teaching. Tutor 5 articulates this.

"*In a physical session, it is easy to demonstrate because the student will see exactly how you went and did whatever that the student is supposed to learn and you can show them physically. But then in an online one is you are sharing on the screen as you are trying to demonstrate sometimes the students will miss some of the important skills, they'll say they understood how you did whatever you were trying to show them, but then they will not grasp it as it would have been done if you did it physical.*" *(Tutor 5)*

The contrast between "show them physically" and "sharing on the screen" suggests that screen sharing is understood not as equivalent demonstration but as impoverished simulation. The phrase "students will miss some of the important skills" implies that what is lost is not peripheral but central to learning. Most significantly, the observation that students "say they understood" but "will not grasp it" identifies a gap between claimed comprehension and actual learning that tutors can perceive but struggle to address under digital conditions.

3.2. Theme 2: Infrastructural Capital as Gatekeeper to Pedagogical Participation

A second major finding concerns how digital tutoring generates new forms of inequality centred on access to technological infrastructure. While tutors did not explicitly use the language of capital, their accounts reveal infrastructure, including data allowances, devices, connectivity, and conducive physical environments, as a prerequisite for meaningful participation that is unevenly distributed

across the student body. Tutor 9 provides the most explicit articulation of these constraints.

"*One big thing is the data cost and poor Wi-Fi on campus as well as on residences where students would be... there is a belief that when you have turned on the video on MS Teams it consumes more data than when the video is off. So now that limits the connection because now the video has to be off. You can't see the student. Maybe the student is busy doing other million things while you are having the consultation.*" *(Tutor 9)*

Several observations are warranted here. First, Tutor 9 identifies data cost as "one big thing," signalling its centrality rather than peripherality to the online tutoring experience. Second, the scope of the problem extends across institutional spaces, covering both campus and student residences, which indicates that it is not isolated to students' home circumstances but pervades the entire educational infrastructure. Third, the phrase "there is a belief" introduces epistemic uncertainty, as tutors and students navigate decisions about video use based on perceptions of data consumption that structure behaviour regardless of technical accuracy. Fourth, and most consequentially, the outcome that the student cannot be seen connects directly to Theme 1's finding about lost embodied communication, demonstrating that infrastructural constraints and pedagogical disruption are mutually reinforcing rather than separate problems. Without visual access, tutors cannot distinguish between students who are fully engaged but data-constrained and those who are multi-tasking or disengaged, which introduces a hermeneutics of suspicion that corrodes the trust on which collaborative pedagogy depends (Bruffee, 1984).

Tutor 3 approaches the same problem from a different angle, focusing on environmental rather than connectivity constraints.

"*I start by greeting the student and ensuring... ensuring that the student is there, but the first thing that I ask the student is the state of where he or she is. How is the situation where he or she is, like is she working in her room or in the office or wherever, so that I'll understand the state of the student, so that we'll move forward and know that the student is prepared for the session and there'll be no any disturbances for them for the session that we're going to have.*" *(Tutor 3)*

The phrase "the state of where he or she is" encompasses not merely internet connectivity but the broader conditions of possibility for focused intellectual work, including quiet space, freedom from interruption, and basic privacy. Tutor 3's careful inquiry before beginning any academic work proper suggests that physical location and environmental conditions have become active prerequisites for collaboration that must be verified rather than assumed. These finding challenges deficit models that locate online learning difficulties solely in student motivation or skill. The phrase "prepared for the session" is revealed to encompass not only academic readiness but situational and material readiness. Students working from crowded residences, sharing devices, or rationing limited data are not unprepared due to individual failings but due to structural disadvantage. Tutor 6 articulates the sustained labour this generates.

"*There are challenges with poor networks, so you need to always ask them questions to check whether they are still within the session.*" *(Tutor 6)*

The modal verb "need" is significant here because checking for continued presence becomes obligatory rather than optional, functioning as a continuous background task that fragments pedagogical attention and transforms what should be academic interaction into connectivity management. The word "always" reinforces that this is not an occasional intervention but a recurrent feature of every online session.

3.3. Theme 3: Platform-Mediated Field Reconfiguration and Struggles Over Pedagogical Authority

A third finding concerns how digital platforms reconfigure the relational dynamics of writing centre consultations, enabling students to control their visibility and engagement in ways that actively undermine collaborative pedagogy's core assumptions about mutual accountability and dialogic exchange. Tutor 8 provides a particularly rich account of these dynamics.

"*The other challenging thing that I also see with the online session is that with some of the students, they will just log in and they keep quiet and expecting the tutor to do all the talking and they are always the first to actually go into the session so that they can record the session.*" *(Tutor 8)*

Three insights emerge from this extract. First, "log in and keep quiet" describes a form of presence-absence where students are technically present but behaviourally absent, a dynamic that would be immediately visible and socially awkward in a physical session. Second, the expectation that the tutor will do all the talking directly inverts the collaborative pedagogy principle that students should drive the session. Third, the observation that students are always the first to record the session suggests the strategic use of platform affordances to extract the tutor's expertise without reciprocal contribution, transforming collaborative dialogue

into consumable content (Ellinor and Girard, 2023). This framing reveals that students arrive with a pedagogical script closer to a lecture than a writing consultation, whether shaped by prior educational experience or by the platform itself, which is designed around asymmetric communication between one speaker and multiple listeners. Tutor 4 identifies additional dimensions of this dynamic in group consultations.

The phrase "there's nothing you can do" is striking in its expression of tutor powerlessness. In physical group consultations, tutors have multiple resources for engaging reluctant participants, including direct address, eye contact, spatial repositioning, or light-hearted acknowledgment of the dynamic. Online, particularly with cameras off, these techniques become inoperative. The platform effectively shields students from the forms of pedagogical intervention that are routine in face-to-face contexts. Tutor 5 captures the experience with a telling metaphor.

"*When it comes to group consultations online, it's not easy trying to capture everyone's attention because you find people having excuse or one person just going quiet and there's nothing you can do.*" *(Tutor 4)*

"Blind session" conveys not only a lack of visual access but a deeper pedagogical uncertainty, as the tutor cannot see who is attending, what they are doing, or how they are responding. Crucially, this blindness is one-directional. Students can see shared screens and hear the tutor while remaining unseen themselves, creating an asymmetry of visibility that tutors consistently experience as disempowering. Tutor 9 describes the group dynamic with particular precision.

"*The part where you are just going into a blind session where the people who are on the other side can choose not to engage and then you would be having a situation where we are trying to motivate them all the time to engage.*" *(Tutor 5)*

The verb "hide" positions students as actively exploiting the group structure and platform affordances to avoid accountability rather than being passively disengaged. Five minutes of complete silence would be excruciating in a physical meeting room, prompting immediate social pressure to respond. Online, such silence can apparently be sustained indefinitely, suggesting that the norms and social pressures governing digital interaction differ substantially from those of embodied space.

"*In terms of group consultations on MS Teams, everyone will hide behind the other group member if you ask a question... you may even spend 5 minutes not being answered, like there will be 5 minutes of complete silence.*" *(Tutor 9)*

The verb "hide" positions students as actively exploiting the group structure and platform affordances to avoid accountability rather than being passively disengaged. Five minutes of complete silence would be excruciating in a physical meeting room, prompting immediate social pressure to respond. Online, such silence can apparently be sustained indefinitely, suggesting that the norms and social pressures governing digital interaction differ substantially from those of embodied space.

3.4. Theme 4: Compensatory Pedagogical Labour and the Intensification of Invisible Work

A fourth finding concerns the extensive additional labour tutors perform to sustain collaborative pedagogy under digital conditions. Rather than accepting diminished dialogue, tutors described deliberate, ongoing efforts to recreate conditions for engagement, build rapport across distance, and compensate for lost embodied communication. This labour spans multiple dimensions, being simultaneously affective in managing emotions and relationships, technical in navigating platform affordances, strategic in engaging reluctant students, and pedagogical in maintaining educational quality. Critically, this work remains largely invisible to institutional metrics, unrecognised in workload allocations, and undervalued in professional development structures. Tutor 4 describes the deliberate humanisation work that opens each session.

"*For my online sessions, what I do most of the time is I start in a very light note. You know, you greet them, you talk about what is going on, ask them how they're feeling... I would tell them, oh, I'm struggling with this. Just make them understand. Oh, I'm human too. Me too. I'm struggling, you know, something like that. So that way I find these students are all relaxed.*" *(Tutor 4)*

The deliberate creation of a relaxed emotional atmosphere before any academic content is addressed represents a conscious compensatory strategy. In face-to-face contexts, humanisation occurs through embodied presence itself, through shared proximity, mutual vulnerability to being seen, and the unspoken signals of relational warmth. Online, particularly with cameras off, it must be performed verbally and explicitly. Self-disclosure of vulnerability, as in "I'm struggling... me too," serves specifically to reduce power distance and render the tutor recognisably human, compensating for the affective information that embodied presence would otherwise supply. Tutor 8 articulates an even more elaborate engagement protocol.

"*One of the first things that I always do, whether it's*

an online or a physical session, is that I ask the student about their day. I ask them about their programme and why are they doing what they're doing. And then we go into the assignment where... I ask them to tell me more about the assignment, what they wrote, what they understood before we go into the whole analysis or evaluation of what they sent." (Tutor 8)

The word "always" signals that this multi-stage sequence, moving from personal inquiry to biographical context and then to academic content, is not occasional practice but a systematic routine. Substantial time is consistently allocated to relationship-building before any text-level work begins. Tutor 8's rationale reveals the underlying pedagogical logic.

"*The reason I do this is so that I always explain to the students that remember what we say may be very different to what we put down and three quarters of the time I promise you that is actually what happens because when we go through what they would have written down, because they've already told me something verbally, when we get to a point where they wrote something which conflicts or which does not really depict what they said verbally when we're discussing it, then that's when I ask 'and you wrote this'. What you wrote here is not what you actually meant." (Tutor 8)*

This reveals a sophisticated understanding that spoken articulation of ideas frequently precedes and diverges from written formulation, and that the gap between intention and text constitutes the productive site for teaching. By first establishing what students intended to communicate verbally, Tutor 8 creates a diagnostic baseline against which the written text can be evaluated, a method that depends entirely on sustained dialogue and relational trust, which is precisely what platform constraints threaten. Tutor 9 describes a different compensatory strategy in the form of upfront expectation-setting to counteract platform-induced passivity.

"*What I usually do for online consultations is to first lay down the expectations. I would tell the students what I expect from them and I also give them an opportunity to ask or to give comments... I always remind them that I am the tutor here. They are the students. I am at their service, so they are the ones that should do most of the talking." (Tutor 9)*

The striking paradox here is that asserting authority ("I am the tutor here") is immediately followed by deferral ("I am at your service") and power inversion ("they are the ones that should do most of the talking"). What in a face-to-face context would be communicated through spatial arrangement and body language must be verbalised explicitly online, adding a layer of communicative overhead that does not exist in embodied interaction. Tutor 1 and Tutor 6 both describe a further form of verification labour that recurs throughout sessions.

"*Some students at times, you end up having to ask if [they] are you still there? Are you still connected?" (Tutor 1)*

"*There are challenges with poor networks, so you need to always ask them questions to check whether they are still within the session." (Tutor 6)*

These practices, checking whether students remain present and connected, represent ongoing labour that is entirely unnecessary in face-to-face contexts where presence is self-evident. The modal "need" in Tutor 6's account confirms that this is not elective but obligatory, and the frequency implied by "always" indicates it occurs continuously throughout sessions. A further pattern emerged in how tutors articulated their preferences. Tutor 3 states plainly that it is better to work with the student face-to-face than online, while Tutor 8 elaborates that face-to-face consultation gives "more of the human touch." The phrase "the human touch" is analytically significant because it identifies a quality of embodied human presence that digital mediation is perceived to lack or diminish, framing the preference not as personal comfort but as a claim about what collaborative pedagogy fundamentally requires.

Navigating the paradox of AI suspicion in tutoring sessions, during an MS Teams consultation, Tutor 6 observed that a particular student's essay on academic argumentation displayed unusually polished syntax and sophisticated argumentative structure markedly incongruent with the student's previous writing patterns. This observation prompted what might be termed the paradox of AI suspicion: addressing suspected AI use risks positioning the tutor as a surveillant gatekeeper and collapsing the collaborative relationship, yet overlooking the possibility implicitly validates potential academic dishonesty. Tutor 6 navigated this tension by reframing the session through dialogic inquiry. Rather than accusing or ignoring, the tutor offered genuine praise for the student's argument before asking an open question about how the student had developed that specific line of reasoning. This invitation required the student to demonstrate intellectual ownership of the work. When the student could not articulate the reasoning with confidence, the tutor shifted to process-oriented discussion, observing that there appeared to be a jump from the evidence to the conclusion and suggesting they slow down together to explore how the student might build that bridge independently. This pedagogical move restored the tutor's collaborative role whilst simultaneously creating

conditions for authentic intellectual engagement, irrespective of whether AI had been involved. The tutor's labour in managing this tension remained largely invisible in institutional metrics, yet proved essential to sustaining dialogic engagement under technological constraint. This example illustrates how the four themes intersect: tutors lose embodied access to authenticity signals (Theme 1), must continuously verify presence and engagement (Theme 2), navigate platform affordances that enable student anonymity (Theme 3), and perform substantial compensatory labour to restore authentic dialogue (Theme 4).

4. DISCUSSION

This section interprets the four themes presented in the Results in relation to Bourdieu's theoretical framework and the wider empirical literature on digital pedagogy, educational inequality, and academic labour. Where the Results section stayed close to the evidence, the Discussion situates the findings within the broader scholarly conversations they illuminate and extend. Each sub-section addresses one theme in turn, examining how the findings align with, diverge from, or productively extend existing theoretical and empirical work. Taken together, the discussion develops a central argument, which is that the challenges tutors encounter are not incidental problems amenable to technical solutions but structural features of a transition that was undertaken without adequate attention to what collaborative pedagogy materially and relationally requires in order to function. The implications of this argument extend beyond writing centres to any pedagogical context in which relational teaching is being digitally mediated without sufficient institutional reckoning with the labour, infrastructure, and field conditions that good teaching depends on.

4.1. Embodied Pedagogical Habitus and the Materiality of Collaborative Practice

The four themes presented above collectively demonstrate that digital mediation is not a neutral shift in delivery mode but a transformation of the pedagogical field itself. Interpreted through Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus of habitus, field, capital, and symbolic violence, the findings reveal how the material and technological conditions of contemporary writing support reshape tutors' professional practice, reproduce structural inequalities in new forms, and generate extensive invisible labour. This section discusses each theme in relation to theoretical frameworks and existing empirical literature before drawing the findings together.

The disruption of non-verbal literacy documented in Theme 1 exemplifies what Bourdieu (1990) terms "hysteresis," referring to the temporal lag between habitus and field that occurs when actors trained under one set of material conditions encounter radically altered circumstances. Writing centre tutors develop what might be called a "collaborative pedagogical habitus" through sustained face-to-face practice, encompassing tacit knowledge about reading student body language, knowing when to intervene and when to hold back, and using spatial positioning to signal non-hierarchical partnership (Grimm, 1999). Crucially, this habitus is not merely cognitive but profoundly embodied, residing in perceptual habits, gestural repertoires, and the felt sense of pedagogical rhythm. When tutoring moves online, this embodied habitus encounters what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) call a "mismatch" between incorporated dispositions and objective conditions. The body, trained as a finely calibrated instrument for reading and responding to other bodies, finds itself operating in a sensorially impoverished environment where many of its cultivated capacities are rendered inoperative, representing a form of partial de-skilling in which hard-won professional expertise becomes temporarily unusable.

The finding also productively extends Bourdieu's theorisation of habitus by foregrounding its material conditioning. While Bourdieu theorised habitus primarily in relation to class reproduction and field-specific dispositions, he paid relatively little attention to how habitus develops in relation to specific technologies or material infrastructures. The present study suggests that pedagogical habitus is materially conditioned, as tutors' embodied expertise developed in contexts where physical presence, visual access, and acoustic richness were simply taken for granted. When those affordances disappear, habitus reveals a dependency on infrastructural supports that were previously invisible. Kress (2009) argues that meaning making is inherently multimodal, relying on the complex orchestration of speech, gesture, gaze, spatial positioning, and material artefacts. Digital platforms strip away most of these modalities and force communication into primarily linguistic channels. Studies of online collaborative learning have consistently documented the challenges of establishing social presence without embodied co-presence (Garrison et al., 1999; Kreijns et al., 2003), findings that align closely with the tutor accounts

examined here.

These findings resonate with literature on emergency remote teaching during COVID-19. Hojeij et al. (2023) found that teachers experienced profound disorientation when forced online, describing feelings of "teaching in the dark" and struggling to gauge student understanding without visual cues. Similarly, Rapanta et al. (2020) documented how interactive teaching methods became difficult to sustain when mediated by video conferencing platforms. A divergent strand of literature does celebrate digital teaching's affordances for inclusive pedagogy, arguing that removing embodied presence can reduce hierarchies, create safer spaces for marginalised students, and enable asynchronous participation that accommodates diverse schedules and learning styles (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008; Manca and Ranieri, 2016). The present findings do not negate these affordances but contextualise them within a specific pedagogical tradition. Writing centre pedagogy, as theorised by North (2013), Bruffee (1984), and subsequent scholars, is fundamentally premised on synchronous, dialogic interaction where tutors and students co-construct understanding through talk. It depends on what Grimm (1999) calls "good intentions" made legible through bodily presence and what Mackiewicz and Thompson (2018) term "rapport-building strategies" that rely heavily on paralinguistic and nonverbal communication. For this distinctive pedagogical approach, the loss of embodied presence is not a neutral trade-off but a fundamental challenge to core practice.

The second dimension of Theme 1, namely demonstrative teaching, is illuminated by Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning, which emphasises that novices learn not merely by watching but by being physically present in the workspace, sensing the rhythm of activity, and engaging in immediate guided practice. Writing tutorials, particularly when focused on academic writing skills such as searching databases, structuring arguments, or formatting citations, can be understood as micro-apprenticeships in scholarly practice. When these move online, students cannot see over the tutor's shoulder, cannot easily interject at moments of confusion, and cannot readily engage in immediate practice with the tutor observing and providing real-time feedback. Drawing on phenomenological accounts of skill acquisition, physical demonstration provides simultaneous visual, kinaesthetic, spatial, and temporal information channels (Merleau-Ponty et al., 2013), whereas screen sharing offers primarily visual information from a fixed perspective, often mediated through poor image quality or connection lag. The finding that learning degradation may not be immediately apparent challenges the frequently made claim in educational technology literature that good pedagogy translates seamlessly across modalities when teachers are adequately trained (Hodges et al., 2020), pointing instead to the irreducible materiality of embodied pedagogical knowledge.

4.2. Infrastructural Capital, Symbolic Violence, And Digital Inequality

The findings of Theme 2 suggest the need to extend Bourdieu's (1986) typology of capital to encompass what might be termed "infrastructural capital," referring to access to reliable digital connectivity, functional devices, sufficient data, and conducive physical environments for online participation. Like Bourdieu's other capital forms, infrastructural capital is unequally distributed, often mapping onto existing patterns of economic inequality. It is also convertible, in that economic capital can purchase better devices, unlimited data plans, or private study spaces. It functions as a gatekeeper as well, effectively excluding individuals from fields such as digital education where participation requires it, regardless of their cultural capital or social capital. However, infrastructural capital also has distinctive properties. Unlike cultural capital, which is embodied through long socialisation, infrastructural capital is entirely externalised, consisting of technologies and spaces that must be continually accessed and maintained. This makes it peculiarly vulnerable to disruption through network outages, depleted data, or device failure, in ways that embodied cultural capital is not. Moreover, infrastructural capital is frequently rendered invisible to those who possess it, a phenomenon Bourdieu terms "misrecognition," which leads those with reliable connectivity to attribute online engagement difficulties to individual failings rather than structural inequalities (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

The South African higher education context amplifies these dynamics substantially. Research conducted during and after the COVID-19 pandemic revealed stark inequalities in students' access to devices, data, and connectivity, consistently intersecting with race and class (Mhlanga and Moloi, 2020; Czerniewicz et al., 2020). The legacy of apartheid spatial planning means that poor and working-class Black students are disproportionately likely to live in areas with inadequate digital

infrastructure (van Dijk, 2020), while Moyo and Munoriyarwa (2021) found that data costs in South Africa are among the world's highest relative to income, making unlimited connectivity economically inaccessible for most students. Institutional responses have often been piecemeal, with data allocations distributed during emergency remote teaching frequently insufficient for sustained video conferencing (Cilliers and Funda, 2024). Heeks (2022) argues that digital inequality in South Africa should be understood not as a binary digital divide but as a spectrum of differentiated access, where students may technically possess connectivity but under such constrained conditions that meaningful participation remains difficult.

How infrastructure shapes response to suspected AI use. When Tutor 3 encountered a student, whose video had been turned off due to data constraints (as described in Theme 2), and that same student submitted writing that appeared AI-generated, the tutor faced compounded epistemic uncertainty. Was the student disengaged, as might be assumed from minimal participation? Were they structurally constrained by infrastructure? Or were they reliant on AI tools? The tutor could not visually assess engagement, could not readily build rapport to enable honest dialogue about academic integrity, and could not draw on embodied cues to gauge understanding. Instead, Tutor 3 deployed what emerged as infrastructural empathy. The tutor acknowledged that the video was off and that data could pose genuine difficulties, then invited the student to work through the material together by explaining in their own words what a particular section was arguing. This approach neither assumed dishonesty nor ignored it; rather, it recognised structural constraints whilst creating space for the student to demonstrate authentic engagement. Where infrastructure was poor and platform affordances enabled anonymity, suspected AI use became entangled with infrastructural inequality, making it impossible to separate pedagogical concerns from material ones. Institutions that failed to address infrastructural capital thereby failed to create conditions in which tutors could ethically address AI-related concerns. The tutor's ability to navigate this complexity hinged not on pedagogical skill alone, but on the willingness to recognise how inequality in digital access fundamentally altered both the nature of suspected academic dishonesty and the possibilities for dialogue.

These findings align with the growing literature on digital inequality in higher education. Czerniewicz and Brown (2013) introduced the concept of "digital strangers" versus "digital natives" in South African higher education, demonstrating that differential infrastructure access intersects with race and class to reproduce educational inequality in new forms. Ely's (2023) concept of the "hidden curriculum" of digital technology is equally pertinent, since online learning platforms tacitly assume constant reliable connectivity, unlimited data, personal devices, and private quiet spaces, thereby privileging certain students while marginalising others through apparently neutral technical requirements. What the present findings add to this literature is specific attention to how infrastructural inequality undermines collaborative pedagogy in particular. When infrastructural capital is unequally distributed, the presumption of communicative equality on which writing centre pedagogy depends collapses entirely. This asymmetry produces symbolic violence in the Bourdieusian sense, as the structural cause of reduced engagement becomes invisible and is replaced by attributions of individual deficiency (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). When poor connectivity or depleted data forces a student to participate with video off and minimal verbal contribution, this may be interpreted by the tutor, the institution, or the student themselves as lack of motivation or preparation rather than as the structural outcome it is. The tutors' compensatory adaptations, while well-intentioned, also risk normalising these inequitable conditions, as developing workarounds for poor infrastructure may inadvertently enable institutions to avoid investing in infrastructural justice, reflecting a broader pattern in which frontline academic staff compensate through intensified labour for systemic under-resourcing (Mountz et al., 2015).

4.3. Platform Logics, Field Reconfiguration, And Pedagogical Authority

Theme 3 is most productively understood through Bourdieu's concept of field as semi-autonomous social spaces structured by struggles over specific forms of capital and legitimate practice (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The writing centre field privileges collaborative learning, peer tutoring, process-oriented pedagogy, and non-evaluative feedback, with tutors' professional authority resting on their capacity to facilitate dialogue, scaffold learning, and build rapport. When tutoring moves online, the field does not simply relocate but is reconfigured. Platforms such as MS Teams are not neutral containers but mediators with their own embedded logics and constraints (van Dijck et al.,

2018). Designed for corporate meetings and webinars, MS Teams privileges a primary speaker addressing listeners. Features such as "raise hand," "mute," and "record" reinforce asymmetric communication patterns, while the platform lacks built-in affordances for the sustained, multi-directional dialogue central to writing centre pedagogy (Bayne, 2015). This constitutes a struggle over what Bourdieu (1998) terms the "principles of hierarchisation" within a field, where tutors drawing on writing centre logic emphasise visibility, reciprocity, and dialogue, while students may leverage platform affordances that enable minimal compliance regardless of intent.

Critical platform studies emphasise that platforms are sociotechnical assemblages embedding specific values and power relations (Harracá et al., 2023; Lockhart, 2025). Systems designed for corporate efficiency, scalability, and measurability conflict with pedagogical values of care, dialogue, and open-ended exploration (Williamson, 2017). When universities adopt corporate platforms, those field logics enter educational spaces and reshape pedagogical relations (Komljenovic, 2021). The finding that students "hide behind" group members further reflects the well-documented phenomenon of social loafing, which is the reduction of individual effort in group contexts (Latané et al., 1979), and which digital environments may intensify by reducing visibility and accountability, thereby altering what Goffman (2023) describes as "impression management." The power dynamics described in Theme 3 also resonate with Foucault's (1977) analysis of disciplinary power. The classic classroom places students under teacher surveillance while authority remains central and visible. The camera-off online session inverts this arrangement, with tutors sharing screens and speaking while students observe from positions of relative anonymity, creating the anxiety and frustration that tutors describe precisely because it reverses the surveillance capacity, they experienced as enabling in face-to-face contexts.

Critical pedagogy scholars have long argued that student resistance can be productive, signalling alienation from oppressive educational practices or asserting autonomy (Freire, 1970). Students who resist surveillance or strategically minimise their participation might, from this perspective, be exercising legitimate resistance against educational practices experienced as controlling, particularly given the race, class, and linguistic hierarchies that persist in South African higher education (McKenna, 2010). Alternatively, minimalist participation may reflect rational adaptation to credential-focused institutional cultures under neoliberalism, with students treating online consultations as opportunities to extract maximum value with minimum effort (Naidoo, 2016). The finding does not resolve this tension but foregrounds its complexity. What is clear is that when students treat consultations as content delivery to be consumed, they reject the epistemology of collaborative knowledge construction that the writing centre was established to embody. Bruffee's (1984) social constructivist rationale for peer tutoring presumes participants willing to engage in mutual vulnerability, sharing half-formed ideas and building understanding collaboratively (North, 2013). Platform logics, infrastructure constraints, and prior educational socialisation towards passive reception all intersect to make this collaborative stance more difficult to sustain.

Platforms that enable both disengagement and AI reliance emerged as a significant challenge. The affordances of MS Teams that enabled students to disengage by keeping cameras off, staying muted, and maintaining minimal participation created conditions equally conducive to AI-assisted work. A student might generate an essay through ChatGPT during the consultation itself, sharing a screen that appeared to show live writing but actually displayed AI-generated output. Another student might participate minimally because they had already submitted AI-generated work and sought only to extract feedback without genuine dialogue. Tutor 5 articulated this compound challenge by describing the fundamental opacity of the platform, noting that when a student kept their camera off and was not really engaging, there was no way to determine whether they were overwhelmed, multi-tasking, or simply pasting AI output. The platform offered no assistance in understanding what was genuinely happening in the interaction. The result was that platform logics designed for corporate efficiency created conditions in which both pedagogical alienation and academic dishonesty became difficult to distinguish from one another. Tutors could not easily re-establish the dialogic conditions necessary to detect and address AI use because the very platforms intended to extend access simultaneously obscured the relational foundations that collaborative pedagogy required. This represented a second-order effect of platform mediation where platforms did not merely reshape pedagogical authority but also reshaped the possibility of ethical engagement with emerging questions about AI-generated writing. The infrastructure intended to

democratise access paradoxically created the conditions under which both academic integrity and meaningful dialogue became harder to sustain.

4.4. Affective Labour, Everyday Resistance, And Institutional Accountability

The compensatory labour documented in Theme 4 is best understood through Hochschild's (2012) foundational theorisation of affective labour, which examined how service workers must manage their own and customers' emotions as a core job requirement. This "emotion work" involves producing particular feeling states in others through the strategic deployment of one's own emotions, requiring what Hochschild calls "deep acting," which entails genuinely feeling the emotions one displays rather than merely performing them superficially. Subsequent scholars extended this concept to teaching (Hargreaves, 1998), social work (Smith, 1992), and academic work more broadly (Ogbonna and Harris, 2004), consistently finding that affective labour is intensive and skilled, invisible and undervalued in official job descriptions and institutional metrics, disproportionately performed by women and marginalised groups, and personally costly, with potential consequences for emotional exhaustion and burnout. The present findings demonstrate that online tutoring substantially intensifies these demands. Tutors must consciously create warmth, connection, and trust through verbal and written communication alone, managing student anxiety about online learning and their own frustration with platform limitations while sustaining engagement with invisible, potentially disengaged participants.

The sophisticated pedagogical strategy described by Tutor 8, namely establishing verbal intention before textual analysis, reflects a well-documented gap between spoken and written language that collaborative tutoring is uniquely positioned to address (Pelphrey, 2025). This method depends entirely on sustained dialogue and relational trust, which is precisely what platform constraints threaten. Similarly, Tutor 9's paradoxical positioning in asserting authority while simultaneously deferring it reflects what writing centre scholarship calls navigating the "directive/non-directive continuum" (Clark, 2001), where tutors must exercise authority to define the session structure while positioning students as primary agents. In face-to-face contexts, this negotiation occurs partly through spatial arrangement and paralinguistic cues. Online, it must be fully verbalised, adding communicative overhead that does not exist in embodied interaction.

Tutors' explicit preference for face-to-face interaction, articulated not as personal comfort but as pedagogical conviction, represents what Scott (1985) calls "everyday resistance," referring to the assertion of subordinated values and practices against dominant impositions without overt refusal. Rather than declining to tutor online, which could risk employment, tutors frame embodied interaction as pedagogically superior, thereby defending the legitimacy of their professional habitus against platform logics that threaten to render it obsolete. These finding challenges celebratory narratives in educational technology literature that position digital teaching as inherently progressive and future-oriented (Bayne and Gallagher, 2021). Tutors' resistance is neither technophobic nor conservative. It reflects expert knowledge that collaborative pedagogy relies on communicative resources that digital platforms systematically weaken, constituting what Feenberg (2002) describes as the democratic rationalisation of technology, referring to an insistence that technology serve human needs and pedagogical values rather than requiring humans to adapt to technological imperatives.

Across all four themes, a consistent pattern emerges. The transition to digital tutoring was undertaken without adequate attention to what collaborative pedagogy requires materially and relationally in order to function. The costs of this transition have been absorbed by tutors through intensified invisible labour rather than addressed institutionally through investment in infrastructure, platform design, workload recognition, or professional development. Naming this labour is a necessary first step, but it is insufficient on its own. Institutions must incorporate it into workload models, recognise it in performance review processes, and treat its intensification as evidence of structural under-resourcing rather than individual overperformance. Without this, the current arrangement constitutes a subsidy in which tutors' unrecognised effort underwrites a model of digital provision that would otherwise be visibly inadequate.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined how writing centre peer tutors sustain collaborative, dialogic pedagogy in digital and AI-mediated tutoring environments at a South African university. The findings converge on one conclusion: digital mediation is not a neutral shift in delivery mode but a transformation of the pedagogical field itself. Four interrelated dynamics were identified. Tutors experienced the disruption of

an embodied pedagogical habitus, losing access to the non-verbal communicative resources on which collaborative practice depends. Infrastructural inequality in connectivity, devices, and data functioned as a gatekeeping form of capital, producing symbolic violence when structural disadvantage was misrecognised as individual disengagement. Corporate platforms reconfigured pedagogical authority in ways more conducive to passive consumption than dialogic exchange. Tutors performed extensive, largely invisible compensatory labour to sustain meaningful engagement. Collectively, the findings show that the costs of digital transition have been absorbed by tutors through unrecognised effort rather than addressed institutionally.

Theoretically, the study extends Bourdieu's framework by articulating infrastructural capital as analytically distinct, by demonstrating how platforms reconfigure educational fields as non-human actors, and by showing that pedagogical habitus is materially conditioned as well as socially structured. These extensions offer generative tools for scholars in academic literacies, higher education policy, and digital sociology. Within the South African context, the findings carry heightened urgency. Educational technologies developed in Global North corporate contexts risk imposing values and assumptions misaligned with local pedagogies, linguistic realities, and decolonial commitments. The question of which platforms are adopted, on whose terms, and in whose interests is inseparable from broader institutional questions about transformation, equity, and epistemic justice.

As generative AI tools are integrated more deeply into higher education, the dynamics identified here grow more acute. AI systems are routinely framed as neutral tools that enhance efficiency and widen access, yet their deployment is shaped by the same institutional logics that structured the move to platform-based tutoring. Without attention to labour, infrastructure, and pedagogy, AI risks further deskilling tutors and legitimising reduced human contact.

This study has several limitations. First, the study was conducted at a single writing centre at the Durban University of Technology with nine purposively selected tutors, the findings offer depth rather than breadth, and researchers in different institutional contexts may encounter dynamics that diverge from those documented here, pointing to the value of multi-site replication. The reliance on interview data alone is a further constraint, as retrospective self-report cannot fully capture real-time tutoring practice. A multi-method design incorporating observational data from recorded sessions or face-to-face consultations would allow direct comparison between what tutors describe and what they are observed doing. Perhaps most significantly, the study centres exclusively on tutor perspectives, and interpretations regarding student behaviour are necessarily mediated through tutor perception. Future research should centre student perspectives and examine how different platform architectures shape learning relationships. Its questions apply wherever pedagogy is being digitally mediated, which are, who ultimately bears the cost when the material conditions for good teaching are absent, and what would it truly mean to govern educational technology by what learning genuinely needs.

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