Introduction

The 2012 HELTASA annual conference held at the scenic Stellenbosch University attracted a large number of conference delegates as well as 360 abstracts.

HELTASA, after many years of hosting annual conferences, has embarked on producing Conference Proceedings that are in line with the Department of Higher Education and Training’s Policy and Procedures for Measurement of Research Output of Public Higher Education Institutions. HELTASA membership also seeks to take conference outputs on to a higher level in the quality of the papers as well as building the capacity of its members.

32 manuscripts were submitted. After a rigorous reviewing process, 11 papers were finally published.

Conference papers were sub-divided into six themes

- Student Engagement and Support
- Teaching with Technology
- Academic Literacies
- Professional Development
- Curriculum Design
- Knowledge Construction and Management

Review process

The peer review process is an academic convention that helps in the production of papers that have undergone scrutiny by scholars. At one level the process ensures that scientific practices are retained and new knowledge disseminated. On the other, which is where HELTASA strongly lurched on, it provides a platform for capacity building for an incoming generation of academics.

The first step involved the reviewing of abstracts. A team of peer reviewers eliminated abstracts that were far below the mark. Authors of abstracts that showed potential were given feedback on how best to improve their manuscripts.

Further feedback was given to authors at conference on presentation of the papers. Time was given for authors to take on board the feedback they had received.

A much more stringent and systematic peer review process then followed. A double blind review was followed. Manuscripts were submitted to a co-ordinating office which would then forward them to two peers. Neither the author nor the peer reviewers knew the identity of the other. At this stage peer reviewers had to state whether a manuscript was publishable or not. When the two peer reviewers differed on a manuscript, a member of the Editorial Committee acted as an arbitrator.

After further revision publishable manuscripts were submitted to the Editorial Committee. It is that Committee that gave the final go ahead of the publication of the HELTASA 2012 Conference Proceedings.

Editorial Committee Members

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<tr>
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Abstract

New first-year students are at a vulnerable stage in their academic careers. One form of academic support that might be helpful to second-language English students is access to a database of multi-languages video explanations. This paper considers the first action research cycle in a first-year mathematics course where students collaboratively made video explanations on Blackberry Torch devices. Challenges included technical issues affecting the quality of the videos, ethical concerns and finding a suitable platform for the database. Comparisons between the examination performance of students who made or viewed videos posted on a Facebook group and those who did not suggest that making or viewing the videos benefits students.

Rationale

Most students at universities in South Africa do not receive tuition in their home language (Gerber, Engelbrecht, Harding and Rogan 2005). This may be a contributing factor to the substantially higher failure rate of black students compared to white students in South African universities (Scott, Yeld and Hendry 2007). Despite research suggesting that that students learn better in their home language (Neville-Barton and Barton 2004), there is little non-English support at English-medium universities, apart from peer help or, where possible, from individual lecturers or tutors. Students who are used to non-English explanations from school may be more at risk until they have established university peer networks that offer this language support, given that developing the cognitive academic language proficiency needed for successful tertiary studies takes at least five years (Grayson 2009). However, it may take weeks to establish peer networks and same-language peers may not be available for some students, particularly in small classes.

The action research cycle presented in this paper is motivated by the question, will a database of multi-language videos help first year students adjust to university and increase their chances of success in first year mathematics? The objective of the first action research cycle reported in this paper is to learn from the experience of managing student-produced videos from production to distribution.

The end product of this project is a database of multi-language explanations of first year mathematics problems which current and future students can use and to which they can contribute. It is hoped that this Open Education resource can also contribute to easing the transition into university, particularly for new students who are used to explanations in languages apart from English, and for students who find university alienating. As this is a resource that can grow each semester, action research provides a helpful record of what works and does not work to inform future cycles of development of this resource.

Background

The database of video explanations is envisaged to be a resource for all first-year mathematics students, perhaps more so for students who share the prescribed textbook, *Calculus: Concepts and Contexts* by James Stewart, which is popular worldwide. This paper describes the process of video production with a class of 23 students. The students were repeating the course they had failed in their first semester at university. This course was located in an academic support programme and the majority of the students had a non-English home language. Videos were submitted by students in five other South African languages other than English: Ndebele, Sesotho, Venda, Xhosa and Zulu.

Initially the focus was on the development of the database using videos from this class, but the focus moved to the production of the videos and the students’ learning of mathematics through this medium. This first action research cycle therefore consists of two parts: the larger problem of video production by students and the smaller problem of investigating a suitable platform for sharing the videos.

The following sections outline how the ideas used in this project relate to literature on learning and the use of technology in education. This is followed by a description of action research and how the stages planning, acting, observing and reflecting were implemented.
Good teaching practice

Cooperative learning and active learning are recommended practice in Chickering and Gamson's (1987) list of seven principles for good undergraduate teaching. When students are assigned group roles, video production is cooperative (Johnson, Johnson and Stannes 2000). Whereas viewing videos involves passive learning, the production of videos is active and this may be where the development of a video database has the greatest learning potential. Active learning techniques that involve students explaining to their peers have been shown to increase retention and understanding compared to learning activities like reading and listening (Michael 2006). However, it can be intimidating to present in front of a large live audience and in-class presentations are very time-consuming. Making a video with one or two peers provides a less threatening teaching environment (Keamey and Schuck 2006) and allows all students to present in a short contact session. However, more out-of-class time is needed to review the presentations. This can be done by getting students to peer review a selection of presentations. For a lecturer, the main advantage of video presentations over written work may be that poor understanding that can be hidden in written work (often by copying) is more likely to be exposed in a verbal presentation.

Building a Community of Practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) highlighted the importance of the situation in which learning takes place and described learning as a process of social participation in a community of practice rather than simply the acquisition of knowledge. Producing videos that will be shared by their peers might help students identify themselves as contributing participants of the mathematics community. Helping to create a resource for future students in their home language is likely to develop a sense of being part of the university. Active participation can be strengthened by including the option for students to comment on videos or rate them. A rating system would make it easier to identify the best videos when there are multiple videos explaining the same concept.

Technology in Education

Mobile and smart phones have been used as educational devices in and out of classrooms for a number of years (Yerushalmy and Ben-Zaken 2004). However, only recently have popular smart phones had sufficiently high quality video capability to consider their use in classes for video production. Lecturer-made video clips produced on different hardware have been used for open audiences, for example the Khan Academy (khanacademy.org), MIT OpenCourseWare (ocw.mit.edu), TED-Ed (ed.ted.com) and closed audiences, for example vodcasts on universities' learning management systems and through companies offering massive open online courses (MOOCs). Some student-made videos on YouTube.com appear to have been filmed on smart phones. The website MathTV.org hosts student-made video explanations shot with a tablet computer. The expanding availability of video resources raises the challenge of how to select suitable material. This is relevant to lecturers because their students are increasingly making use of online resources (Kirkwood 2008) and may be expecting lecturers to guide them to reliable and relevant resources. The video database described in this paper might be a helpful resource for first-year mathematics students.

Platforms for sharing videos

Some common video-sharing platforms are compared in Table 1. None of the platforms investigated shared all the features identified as advantageous for the video databank, namely being open, free (even when many videos are hosted), having an easy-to-search catalogue (to allow for videos to be searched by language, topic or producer) and allowing for commenting or rating by viewers.

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<th>Catalogue</th>
<th>Allows comments</th>
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**Action Research**

Action research was seen as a suitable tool for the dual purposes of (1) assessing and improving the process of video production by students and (2) the development of the video database for a number of reasons. The project fitted the three prerequisite criteria for an action research study given by Sagor (2011):

1. A project focused on my professional actions.
2. I am empowered to change future action based on the results.
3. A project in which improvement is possible.

Action research has been criticized for not being rigorous but has gained credibility as a research methodology (COBE 2005). Dick’s (2011) latest review of the field of action research has shown great growth in the field of educational action research in 2008 – 2010 compared to previous years. He reports that most educational action research is in K-12 education but there is also much focusing on higher education. It has also been used as a means of professional development for educators (Gentry and Jacobs 2012).

The cyclical nature of action research represented in Figure 1 suited the development of this new project that would run for at least three semesters. The first cycle was envisaged to extend through the first semester of the project. The lessons learnt from this experience might save trouble for others who may want to run similar projects.

![Figure 1: Action research cycles](image)

In practice, I found myself making sub-cycles of reflecting, planning, acting and observing within the semester-long first cycle of this project. This was possibly due to having the two connected projects of managing the production of student-produced videos and developing a database for sharing videos. The following sections describe the stages of the evolving project under the headings of Plan, Act, Observe and Reflect.

**Plan**

With a small class working in groups of two or three and the availability of ten Blackberry Torch smart phones sponsored by Research in Motion, there was no concern about not having sufficient hardware for all students.

Four sources of data were used to address the question of how the processes of managing student-produced videos and developing a database of videos could be improved:

1. Notes from my reflective journal, including feedback from students emerging from discussions with students.
2. A record of the production and use of videos.
3. Students’ written comments in course evaluations.
4. Students’ marks and answers to examination questions.

**Act**

In the first video-making tutorial, students worked on a set of questions in groups of three. Group members were randomly assigned roles of presenter, producer (responsible for recording and submitting the videos and photos) and scribe (responsible for written work). Halfway through the tutorial they were told which question to answer as a video explanation; photographs of solutions to the other questions were submitted, taken on the Blackberry smart phones. This first experience in submitting a video explanation created a context for them that would make the suggestions on filming more relevant to them.
In the second video-making tutorial, a third-year film and media studies student gave a 45 minute presentation of film-making tips for recording mathematics explanations on Blackberry Torch smart phones, possibly a world-first presentation on this topic to an audience of mathematics students. Directly after this, students created video explanations for two questions, making use of the good practice advised in the presentation, such as making their writing bold and colourful, using the pause function between transitions from one shot to another and leaving a border around the object being filmed. However, despite the training, some of the subsequent videos still had poor technical quality, such as the auto-focus adjusting when a hand or pen moved into the shot, making the writing blur.

In the third video-making tutorial, students worked in pairs, with every student having a turn to as a video presenter. The quality of the videos was in general still not very good. Some videos were taken from a distance to allow a blackboard to fit on the screen but this resulted in poor sound quality. This made me reconsider the suitability of the devices for good quality videos in the classroom environments we were using. I was also concerned about the mathematical errors in the videos. My focus shifted to the learning the students were getting as a result of making the videos for this course instead of considering how these videos could be used as a resource for other students. The video quality was not much of a concern if the focus was the learning of mathematics that the students experienced through the process of making the videos. Creating an end-product that could be helpful to future students was of secondary importance to these students. As a result of these thoughts, and also because my search for a suitable platform on which to share the videos had not been successful, I stopped looking for a suitable platform.

A comment from a female student to the student filming her requesting that her body not appear in the video also made me reconsider what I was asking the students to do and to consider alternative ways to present explanations, especially if they were going to be used as open resources. The website Voice Threads offered a platform where a document could be displayed and voice or written comments could be added to document. I posted digitally marked photos of answers and invited students to view and comment on them. There were 21 views of the multi-page document, some of which may have been repeated views by the same student. However, no students added any comments, which was the main feature of the tool. Also, some students reported technical difficulties with getting onto the site, possibly because they had exhausted their monthly free allowance of bandwidth from the university.

Observe

At this point in the course, the students had written their first class test and 19 of the 23 students in the class completed a mid-course evaluation. In the free response section one student expressed strong negative feelings towards making videos in tutorials, finding them “distracting” and wasting time that should be spent on improving their mathematics skills. Although the majority of the students were very happy with the way the course was going, the first test had a low average mark of 54%. This prompted me to revise the structure of the course to include weekly class tests and to vary the weekly tutorial tasks so that videos were not produced every week.

Reflect

Since it appeared that some students found the 45-minute lesson from the top 3rd year film and media studies student to be a waste of time, a better idea could be to have a handout summarizing good practice and common errors as a reference for students while they were making the videos. An online video on video production that students could watch in their own time, or watch as much as they needed would also be a good resource. The cost of developing such a resource would have to be considered. Perhaps similar resources already exist and could be used.

Plan, Act

Eight more tutorials were held from this point to the end of the semester, four of them involving video production. Shortly before the final tutorial, a friend recommended setting up a Facebook group for sharing videos. I suggested this to the class and within a few minutes a student had set up the group. Fourteen students joined the Facebook group and I posted twenty-four videos from the tutorial, submitted by nine students, two of whom were not members of the Facebook group. Each video was posted with a comment from me indicating the correctness of the explanation and posing questions such as, “I noticed two small errors. Can anyone say what they are?” Although everyone in the group viewed the videos, only two students made any comments, and they only commented on two videos each.

Observe

The videos from the final video-making tutorial were posted to a Facebook group set up for this course. Joining the Facebook group was optional and 14 students chose to join. There was also a low hand-in rate for this tutorial as it fell in the last week of the semester when most students had high-stakes assessments for other courses. This presented an opportunity to examine the effectiveness of making and viewing the videos with examination performance on similar questions on the topic ‘integration by substitution’.

A comparison was made between the examination performance on similar questions between students who did and did not make and view the Facebook videos. Of the nine students who made videos, only one student scored 0 for questions on the same topic in the examination. This student had submitted videos that relied heavily on his partner’s written work, and he was marked as not having demonstrated good understanding of the questions he was explaining.
For the thirteen students who did not make videos, those who viewed the videos mostly did better than those who did not make or view videos. Three out of the seven students who only viewed the videos scored 0 while five out of seven students that did not make or view the videos scored 0. These results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of exam scores with making and viewing videos

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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>Not viewed, score 0</td>
<td>0</td>
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Reflect

A limitation of the comparison above is that it is possible that some students viewed the Facebook videos over the shoulder of someone who had joined the group. The chance that this would happen was reduced by limiting the viewability of the videos on the Facebook group to group members only.

The same comparison was not done with class tests because (1) the tests were handed back as soon as possible to the students, leaving little time for a thorough comparison, (2) not all students wrote all the class tests, since each student’s top 5 out of 7 tests contributed to their class mark, (3) until the Facebook group was set up, no easy way to allow and track the students’ viewing of each other’s videos was known.

Reflect: Ethical concerns

The students were told at the start of the course about the idea of a developing a multi-language video database for first-year mathematics. They were told that the videos they would be required to make during tutorials would only be used in the open resource if they wanted them to be shared. They were not required to sign a consent form for the use of the videos until the end of the course so they could decide if they wanted all, some or none of their videos to be shared. The ‘sharing some’ option entailed the lecturer e-mailing the student to get approval for the sharing of videos. Three students chose this option, one preferred not to share the videos made in the course, one did not return the form, one dropped out of the course and seventeen students were happy to have all the videos made in the course free to be shared.

An ethical concern with sharing the videos made in class was that some contained errors. Although the students were willing to share the videos that had errors in them, they might not have been fully aware of all of the errors if they did not take good notice of the feedback and might not have realized that they would be putting themselves up for public criticism. A second concern was that students watching the videos might take in an erroneous explanation as being correct, despite the comments that would accompany the videos and point out the errors.

Some of the students in this class had excellent computer skills and would have made good managers of the database. The original plan for the project was to employ a student on a part-time basis to upload videos on to the database. I interviewed a post-graduate student but felt that a student with experience of the process might be in a better position to manage the database than a post-graduate with no video-making experience. I thought it could be confidence-boosting for a student to take on this job but I felt an ethical concern with paying a student in my course to manage the database. This dilemma contributed to the cessation of my efforts to start the database.

I had originally planned to have small prizes as incentives to get students to contribute videos to the database. This was before I had decided that I would use, if they permitted, the videos that my students would make for this course. Since the videos now contributed towards the students’ class marks, additional incentives seemed unnecessary. The lack of a suitable platform for rating the videos (until the Facebook group was formed) hampered the process of voting for the best videos. It would also have been time consuming for all students to watch all the videos in order to judge them. The idea of incentive prizes may be revisited in a future cycle in which video production is not a required part of a course.

More Reflections and Conclusions

The smart phones used in this study had no SIM cards and were not connected to the internet. Using groupwork in a small class meant that off-task activities with personal devices would be noticed. Having a well-defined task to complete in a limited time might have contributed to no noticeable disruptions from the use of smart phones observed in this study.

A key concern in the second half of the course was poor attendance by students. I started a penalty system for late work but some students continued to miss tutorials sporadically. This might have been because they did not see the benefit of making the videos, they did not feel sufficiently committed to the class, they calculated that focusing their efforts on the weekly class tests was the strategic way to get a
Theories on good teaching practice suggest that the main benefit of the databank will be for the students who produce the videos. “Mathematics is not a spectator sport” is a commonly used quote (Dreyfus, 2002/1994) pertinent to this study. Having the ability to watch an explanation in a language other than English might have benefits but there is the concern that mathematics needs to be practised and students who spend their time watching videos might be decreasing the time available for actively doing mathematics. The learning potential of the databank would be improved by having some kind of activity associated with the video, such as rating (or liking) it, or in students adding comments in places where there are errors.

An outcome of a first-year mathematics course is that students should be able to solve the mathematical problems they encounter in the course. Watching videos made by others might help them to see alternative approaches and make judgments about problem solving strategies that work best for them. This outcome can be measured by correlating performance in tests or examinations with making or viewing videos of similar problems in the database.

This action research cycle has shown that creating videos and critiquing videos in the database is a viable way for students to demonstrate their problem-solving abilities but that there are complexities associated with managing the process of video production and setting up a database. Future action research cycles can build on the work reported in this paper and move towards evaluating the extent to which a multi-language database of videos can help first year students adjust to university and increase their chances of success in first year mathematics.

Acknowledgements

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References


Curriculum mapping as a responsive and reflective process

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Abstract

In response to international and national imperatives as well as legislative requirements, many South African higher education institutions are engaging in activities of curriculum inquiry. This paper will present an approach to curriculum inquiry primarily focusing on the notion of the reflective professional (Light, Cox and Calkins 2009) by applying relational methods such as curriculum mapping (Harden 2001; Madiba 2011) to review, transform and enhance advanced career-oriented programme in management and business at a University of Technology.

Based on a case study of advanced career-oriented programmes in management and business and using a constructivist-interpretivist approach, the researchers will show how curriculum mapping as a generative, collaborative and critically reflective process supported by a strength-based orientation in terms of staff engagement (Bester 2011) can be used to review existing programmes. Curriculum mapping in this instance is not used as an instrumentalist approach to curriculum inquiry and review, but as a contextualised social process (Cornbleth, 1988) which is shaped by dynamic interactions of HE teachers, students, knowledge, and its milieu.

This paper will report on curriculum data obtained from engagement with key stakeholders in focus group discussions as well as relevant official and institutional curriculum documents to conduct a critical review of the existing curricula. The purpose of the curriculum inquiry to identify shortcomings and suggestions for improvement aimed at developing responsive, coherent, engaged and HEQF aligned curricula that will allow students to gain a contemporary command of their field of study.

Introduction

In the introductory chapter of their book Curriculum Inquiry in South African Higher Education, Bitzer and Botha (2011, 17) argue that inquiry in higher education curricula is “a complex business”, since higher education institutions operate in an increasingly challenging and complex environment and the very idea of ‘the curriculum’ is, as stated by Barnett and Coate (2005), unstable and its boundaries vague. Curriculum inquiry, according to Bitzer (2011, 33), is a particular form of educational research addressing different kinds of educational research questions. The following questions form part of curriculum inquiry at the institution where this study was conducted: What are the external and internal change factors impacting on University of Technology curricula? What is the role of key stakeholders in the curriculum inquiry process? What are the conceptions and orientations of academics in terms of curriculum? What is the best possible way to go about the curriculum inquiry process? How do we empower academics through the process of curriculum inquiry to move beyond transmitting subject content to passively receptive or compliant students towards an active-reflective construction of knowledge in a dialogic relationship with students?

Focus of this paper

The focus of this paper is to explore differences among academics’ conceptions of curriculum, how these conceptions influence their curriculum orientations as presented in the subject guides of the subjects they teach; and how through the process of curriculum inquiry, using curriculum mapping as process and tool, academics can be empowered to respond to a call to professionalism. Based on a case study of an advanced career-oriented management and business programme and using a constructivist-interpretivist approach, this paper will show how curriculum mapping as a generative, collaborative and critically reflective process (Madiba, 2011) promotes the notion of a reflective professional (Light et al. 2009), hence a call to professionalism. Curriculum mapping in this instance is not used to encourage a technocratic view of curriculum (Cornbleth, 1988) but to encourage academics to engage critically with curriculum, acknowledging that
curriculum is shaped by dynamic interactions between HE teachers, their students, knowledge, and its milieu. Viewing curriculum as “a contextualised social process” recognises that the focus should be on what knowledge and learning opportunities are made available to students, how these are created in the curriculum, and what values they reflect and sustain (Cornbleth, 1988). Emphasis is therefore placed on the curriculum mapping as a process hence counterbalancing the fact that if curriculum mapping is mainly used as a tool it could be regarded as mainly technical-instrumentalist in nature.

The first section of this paper outlines the notion of a reflective professional, while drawing on the accounts of academics’ conceptions and orientations of curriculum as outlined by various authors (e.g. Fraser and Bosanquet 2007; Light et al. 2009). The second section of this paper explains curriculum mapping as a holistic and relational process and tool for curriculum inquiry (Bester and Scholtz 2012; Madiba, 2011) and the third section describes the empirical data obtained from discussions with fifteen academics in curriculum review focus groups and the analysis of curriculum documentation of nine core subjects of an advanced career-oriented programme in management and business. In addition, the researchers also conducted semi-structured interviews with eight academics after the focus group discussions. In the conclusion, returning to the notion of a reflective professional, challenges and constraints emerging from the empirical data will be discussed as well as recommendations to establish curriculum as praxis.

The notion of a reflective professional

Light, Cox and Calkins (2009, 13) argue that while a call for professionalism is mainly associated with a discourse of excellence for accountability which reflects the overall desire for increased efficiency and competitiveness (Alexander 2000; Solbrekke and Englund 2011), the call to professionalism is a call towards a new way of thinking about learning and teaching (Åkerlind 2008; Gosling and D’Andrea 2001; Trullen and Rodríguez 2011). This call to professionalism is, as stated by Light et al. (2009:14):

... a call to change, but it is also a call to ongoing reflection and change, to an ongoing transformation centred in the learning situation and reflecting the changing nature of that situation ... a call to professionalism.

Light et al. (2009, 15) argue that “being a reflective professional rests in the ability to situate oneself and one’s practice critically within an environment of substantial uncertainty and change, and, to manage that change ...”. It encompasses what Barnett (2003) refers to as professing-in-action, which includes an understanding of the wider professional and academic context, managing the incoherence brought about by changing academic roles, knowledge bases, ways of knowing, diverse student bodies, departmental requirements, institutional demands as well as accreditation demands from external agencies and professional bodies, in other words it requires academics to act as reflective professionals.

Academics’ conceptions of curriculum

Cornbleth (1990, 12) in Fraser and Bosanquet (2006, 282) argues “how we conceive of curriculum and curriculum making is important because our conceptions and ways of reasoning about curriculum reflect and shape how we see, think and talk about, study and act on the education made available to our students.” Conceptions of the curriculum relates to what academics perceive the curriculum to be, both the “curriculum-as-designed and the curriculum-in-action” (Barnett and Coate 2005, 3). Curriculum conception is often defined as a collective set of beliefs about the intended (what it is assumed students are learning), taught or enacted (the curriculum as it is presented to students) and experienced or assessed (what students actually learn) curriculum elements (Chueng and Wong 2002; Kane, Sandretto and Heath 2002; Schraw, Olafson, Van der Veldt and Ponder 2010). It was therefore important to consider the following questions related to curriculum inquiry at our institution:

• What are the academics’ curriculum conceptions in the programme under investigation and how do these conceptions influence their orientations towards the intended and enacted curriculum as evident from their subject guides?
• How can academics, who have had limited involvement in curriculum development, be encouraged to change their curriculum conceptions and orientations, using curriculum mapping as a collaborative and generative process of curriculum inquiry, towards the notion of becoming a reflective professional?

Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) conducted a phenomenographic study to explore the variation in the experiences and understandings that academic teachers in an Australian university have of curriculum. This was based on the following questions posed to academics in semi-structured interviews:

• What is your understanding of curriculum?
• What experiences have you had of curriculum change?
• What are some of the things you see impacting on the curriculum?
According to Fraser and Bosanquet (2006, 272) four distinct categories of description emerged from the data, these are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories of description of academics’ conceptions of curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product-orientation to curriculum</th>
<th>Process-orientation to curriculum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Category A</strong></td>
<td><strong>Category B</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum is the structure and content of a unit/subject</td>
<td>Curriculum is the structure and content of a programme of study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum is defined in terms of the subject content of an individual unit of learning (subject). Curriculum is seen as product to be delivered by the HE teacher and students are seen as ‘consumers’ with limited input, mainly restricted to feedback on teaching practice.</td>
<td>Although the curriculum is still regarded as a product, the focus is on multiple units of learning (subjects) of a programme. The HE teacher plays a pivotal role in defining the curriculum. Although students are mainly receptors of the curriculum, they may influence the HE teacher to change subject content and curriculum delivery in a limited way.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from: Fraser and Bosanquet (2006, 271-277)

Linking curriculum orientations to conceptions of teaching

A two-year study of the teaching conceptions by Light et al. (2009, 28-31) revealed three main categories of teaching conceptions, which relate well to the three curriculum orientations of academics based on Habermas’s theory of ‘knowledge constitutive interests’ described by Fraser and Bosanquet (2006, 279-282) and outlined in Table 2.

From the three conceptions of teaching in higher education defined by Light et al. (2009, 29) as described in Table 2, it is evident that the ‘product’ orientation (Fraser and Bosanquet, 2006) to curriculum change mainly resembles a teacher-focused conception of teaching, while a ‘process’ orientation (Fraser and Bosanquet, 2006) to curriculum change shows different stages of development from a student-focused to a learning-focused conception of teaching. It is also important to note that the categories of description are presented as being distinct from each other with rigid and well-defined boundaries, but these are in fact, to some extent, inter-related.

Light et al. (2009, 15) argue that “being a reflective professional rests in the ability to situate oneself and one’s practice critically within an environment of substantial uncertainty and change, and to manage that change”. These authors advance a dialogic and relational model based on an integrated conception of academic practice: teaching, research and student learning. Curriculum is thus seen as a contextualised social practice (Cornbleth 1988), acknowledging the participation of the HE teacher and students. The notion of becoming a ‘reflective professional’ is therefore supported by research in the academic’s field of study and enhanced by robust intellectually and ethically informed academic dialogue with peers, students and other roleplayers, which is aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the complexity of the conceptual and contextual aspects of the curriculum.
Table 2: Variations between categories of curriculum conceptions and orientations of academics and teaching conceptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of curriculum conceptions and orientations (Based on Fraser and Bosanquet 2006)</th>
<th>Categories of teaching conceptions (Based on Light et al. 2009)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Curriculum from a technical interest</strong></td>
<td><strong>Teacher-focused conception of teaching</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The curriculum is product-oriented. It conforms to the HE teacher’s original intentions for it and it controls student learning. Emphasis is placed on unit (subject) outlines and the programme structure emphasises the extent of control that permeates formal education. Subject experts are normally involved in designing curricula in the light of their subject knowledge and their assumptions about student needs. Subject content is an important aspect of the curriculum. Curriculum change is seen as a means to an end with the path between these as direct and set based on a step-by-step procedure to obtain the pre-determined finished curriculum product.</td>
<td>The HE teacher regards the practice of teaching as one in which he/she is the expert who imparts information to passively receptive or compliant students. Students are expected to accept the knowledge and content delivered to them and the learning achieved is up to the individual students. Teaching is in essence a display of content by the HE teacher overheard by students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Curriculum from a practical (communicative) interest</strong></td>
<td><strong>Student-focused conception of teaching</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HE teachers see their role as using their expert judgement to interpret the curriculum for their students by making meaning of the subject knowledge. HE teachers takes the students’ learning needs into account and focuses on their own teaching practice, seeking ways to improve student learning. Subject learning is an important part of the curriculum making process with reflective teaching practice resulting in curriculum change.</td>
<td>The HE teacher will, although retaining some features of the teacher-focused orientation, recognise that teaching needs to go beyond transmission and will attempt to play a more active role in helping students acquire the subject content by developing teaching strategies and tips to connect the subject content to student needs. The HE teacher still defines and frames the knowledge, but through explanation and demonstration, rather than transmission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Curriculum from an emancipatory interest</strong></td>
<td><strong>Learning-focused conception of teaching</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum is seen as a truly negotiated, dynamic and interactive process that strives for social and intellectual empowerment between HE teacher and students within an ever-changing environment aimed at changing the world-views of both the HE teacher and the students towards emancipation. Students are thus seen as active creators of knowledge and learning is regarded as a social act shared by both HE teacher and students. Although the vision of the curriculum is boundary-less, it is often constrained by what is possible within the university structure and the extent to which academics with an emancipatory interest are prepared or empowered to act as change agents.</td>
<td>The teaching focus is on promoting conceptual change through a process of facilitating students’ construction of knowledge. Knowledge is socially constructed by the student, and the exchange of that knowledge is based on an intersubjective dialogue of shared meanings between HE teacher and students. HE teachers recognise that they are entering in a intersubjective dialogue with their students aimed at supporting students to develop as persons with a focus not merely on developing knowledge but as critical human beings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Academics’ curriculum conceptions and orientations of a career-orientated management programme**

Although several authors (e.g. Barnett and Coate 2005; Carl 1995; Toohey 1999) argue that teachers should not be standing on the periphery and merely be onlookers, but that they should be active participants in the process of relevant curriculum development, most of the current academic staff members at Universities of Technology were not closely involved in previous curriculum reform initiatives at these institutions in the late 1990s. The following observations by academic staff members during a two-day curriculum inquiry workshop indicate possibilities of future involvement:

> ... was quite refreshing, and it was really the first time that I got a ‘deeper’ insight into what my colleagues’ subjects are about; how they teach it and generally one could even sense how they ‘feel’ about their subject(s). Good that all the lecturers were together and to have listened what is covered in each subject ... definite need to re-structure existing subjects.

Many academics regard the curriculum, as described by Stark and Lattuca (1997) in Fraser and Bosanquet (2006:270) as the “syllabus, the content of a specific discipline, or the set of units actually offered to the students, and the time frame in which they occur”. At our institution, subject guides, based on a generic template, are compiled by academic staff to communicate in an user-friendly and accessible...
manner to students the key aspects of what is taught, how it is taught, when it is taught and the measures used to determine whether they have achieved the expected learning outcomes. Since the current curriculum inquiry process at the site of delivery focuses mainly on the intended and enacted curriculum, the researchers decided to use subject guides of the career-orientated management programme under investigation as one of the key sources of information for this research project. Since both researchers also have expertise in curriculum development as well as knowledge of the field of study, this particular approach was also acceptable to the academic staff who participated in this research project.

The analysis of the curriculum data obtained from the subject guides and qualitative data obtained from the focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with academics were analysed using the four categories of description of academics’ conceptions of curricula as defined by Fraser and Bosanquet (2006). The content of the subject guides, or the lack there of, was analysed and the subjects plotted on the continuum from product orientation to process orientation. The quality of the subject guides obtained from academic staff in this programme differ greatly, with some of these guides providing detailed information, while others contained insufficient teaching, learning and assessment guidelines. We decided to map nine of a total of fifteen subjects (referred to as Subject A-I) of the programme and also discussed the mapping with the eight academics who lecture these subjects in semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the semi-structured interviews were to illuminate the curriculum data obtained from the subject guide analysis.

In conducting this analysis, we have mainly focused on the following three inter-related aspects: the curriculum intent, the role of the HE teacher and the role of the student in relation to the curriculum. Table 3 shows the researchers’ interpretation of the differences in curriculum conceptions and orientations of the academic staff of the career-orientated management programme under investigation.

Table 3: Academics’ curriculum conceptions based on analysis of subject guides

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category A: Curriculum is the structure and content of a unit/subject</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject C: The subject guide shows a clear separation between the body of knowledge and the set of skills to be developed and hence fails to show the integration between the theoretical knowledge and the practical skills. The subject guide does not indicate linkages with the other subjects in the programme and seems to be taught in isolation. The learning outcomes place emphasis on the development of skills appropriate to the field of study, e.g. ‘formulate a job description’, without clear links to the disciplinary knowledge. Learning activities are either lacking or ill-defined, hence promoting rote learning.</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category B: Curriculum is the structure and content of a programme of study</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject B: While the curriculum is mainly regarded as a product (e.g. a mere listing of topics), links with other subjects in the programme are present, although not necessarily well developed. It reflects a close coupling with the prescribed textbook e.g. learning outcomes resembles the topics in the textbook, in line with the management as functions approach of the discipline (Tsoukas, 1994: 292). The subject guide resembles a teacher-centred approach to curriculum with students mainly assuming a passive-compliant role with limited emphasis on knowledge construction (e.g. assessment criteria are lacking in this subject guide). Limited evidence of economic and socio-cultural responsiveness in the curriculum, e.g. topics selected do not show relevance to a South African context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects D, E &amp; F: These subjects are offered at first, second and third year level and form one of three major subject areas of the curriculum. Based on the information in the subject guides there appears to be significant overlap in terms of the prescribed subject content between these subjects. The subject guides do not provide sufficient detail in terms of learning outcomes, teaching events, learning activities as well as assessment criteria and methods. Students are mainly receptors of the curriculum and do not play an active role in knowledge construction.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Category C: Curriculum is the students’ experience of learning</th>
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<tr>
<td>Subjects G, H &amp; I: These subjects form part of the core or the vertical spine of the curriculum, yet close alignment is evident. The subject guides indicate clearly how the key concepts are scaffolded from first year to third year. The subject guide of Subject I clearly indicates that the HE teacher promotes student learning and facilitates the construction of knowledge.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Category D: Curriculum is dynamic and interactive process of learning</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject A: This subject has hybrid characteristics and can be placed in both categories. Some evidence of disciplinary and economic responsiveness is provided, e.g. the use of case studies, additional resource material available from the internet and in the form of handouts. The needs of students are accommodated and the focus is on student learning with emphasis on group projects. The curriculum is seen as a collaborative, dynamic process of learning with evidence of both economic, disciplinary, socio-cultural and learning responsiveness (Moll, 2004). The approach used in this subject moves towards seeing management theory as a metatheory incorporating functions, roles, characteristics and to a lesser extend power. (Tsoukas, 1994: 296)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data obtained from the subject guides indicate that the majority of HE teachers in this programme are not adopting a student-centred
approach. Only one subject guide provides evidence of a curriculum orientation towards learning as a dynamic and interactive process of learning. The subject guides show that the curriculum is mainly viewed as a product with emphasis on a set of topics, as outlined in the prescribed textbooks, to be transmitted to students. Although a number of subject guides indicate that the HE teachers are aware of the purpose of the programme, very few are attempting to align the learning outcomes of their individual subjects with the exit level outcomes of the programme. The subject guides of subjects G, H and I indicate that students are playing a more active role in the learning process and there is also some evidence of a dynamic interaction between HE teachers and students. Reflecting on the feedback obtained from the academic staff in this programme during a two-day workshop and the data obtained from the subject guides, it is evident that reflective teaching practice is located in and bounded by the role the HE teacher as curriculum-transmitter and that curriculum change is therefore limited to ‘what’ (subject content) is delivered and ‘how’ (teaching methods) it is delivered with very limited acknowledgement of the students’ role in the curriculum making process and even less understanding of what it means to be a reflective professional. This brings us to the next section of this paper of how to use curriculum mapping as a relational, generative and dialogic process to empower academic staff.

Curriculum mapping as process and tool to enhance reflective professionalism

The concept of curriculum mapping and curriculum management systems was pioneered in the late 1970s and early 1980s by Prof Fenwick English, who advocated “the use of mapping to ensure that the declared aims of a curriculum match those which are taught and learned” (Robley, Whittle and Murdoch-Eaton 2005, 224). Curriculum mapping is different from a teaching plan. A teaching plan would describe the detail of what and how a teacher intends to teach – sequencing both teaching and learning activities and resources used, while a curriculum map is “a diagrammatic representation of the curriculum displaying the different elements of the curriculum and the interrelationships between these different elements” (Harden 2001, 125). Taking into account that the main aim of curriculum change at our institution is to empower academic staff to become reflective professionals, curriculum mapping is used both as a process and an evaluation tool to encourage academics to change their curriculum orientation from a product-centred to a process-centred approach.

Curriculum mapping as a process, as defined by Madiba (2011, 381) enables academic staff to have “rich and authentic conversations” about their existing curriculum orientations and teaching practice. Madida (2011, 382) describes curriculum mapping as a “reliable mechanism to steer the teaching and learning agenda towards achieving the desired outcomes”. Furthermore, curriculum mapping as a process, provides an opportunity to engage in an iterative learning process and critical reflection on curriculum and pedagogical issues such as:

- Identifying gaps, addressing overlap and improving coherence in a programme (Freeman, Hancock, Simpson and Sykes, 2008).
- Embedding graduate attributes in the curriculum (Sumsion and Goodfellow, 2004).
- Enhancing aspects related to constructive alignment in the curriculum (Biggs, 2003).
- Enhancing opportunities for critical reflection (Sumsion and Goodfellow, 2004).
- Engaging with external agencies on curriculum issues.

Curriculum mapping should therefore be viewed as part of the continuous improvement process of an institution, encouraging academics to transform their teaching practice. Yet, curriculum mapping as a process promotes a call to professionalism by encouraging academics to respond to the needs of a changing higher education context and competitive workplace situations. It also requires academics to investigate different perspectives and frameworks within the discipline leading to the development of a metatheory to illuminate the nature of the discipline (management) as suggested by Tsoukas (1994, 299). Bester and Scholtz (2012, 295-296) suggest a curriculum mapping process consisting of three inter-related phases, namely:

- Situation analysis and comprehensive review of the existing programme: During this phase of the curriculum mapping process, a detailed situation and needs analysis is conducted. Key roleplayers such as alumni, employers, industry, professional bodies and other interested parties should be involved. Engaging with a wide variety of people at this stage provides the benefit of obtaining input from a wide range of expertise and opinions on the effectiveness of the existing programme. At the institution where this investigation was done, academic staff members (including full-time, part-time and service staff) participated in a two-day workshop to critically review the existing curriculum. With reference to the lines of inquiry promoted by Madiba (2011, 383) the researchers used a set of questions to guide the curriculum review process, these are some to the questions:
  - What are the aims and purpose of this programme?
  - What are the national, regional, institutional, industry and societal needs that this programme aims to address? How are these addressed in the curriculum?
  - How is the programme structured and why is it structured in this manner?
  - What will students learn in this programme?
  - How does the teaching-learning strategy promote knowledge construction and the development of a deep approach to learning?
  - In what ways do the teaching-learning strategy, methods of teaching and the nature of learning activities take the student profile into account?
  - How is student learning assessed in this programme?
  - How well suited are the assessment methods to measure students’ achievement of learning outcomes?
• During the first day, the academic staff members focused mainly on questions relating to the broad knowledge areas in
the curriculum, the programme structure, curriculum design, teaching, learning and assessment. The following is a brief
summary by the researchers of the challenges and constraints that emerged from this discussion:
• There is not enough evidence of stakeholder engagement (e.g. industry, alumni, students, staff, professional bodies) to
inform the curriculum review process within a changing higher education and workplace context.
• In addition, concerns regarding both disciplinary and economic responsiveness and relevancy (Moll, 2004) were raised, e.g.
the appropriateness of computer software programmes and the displacement of disciplinary knowledge in some subject
areas.
• The current curriculum orientation encourages a teacher-focused view and resulted in an over-emphasis on covering subject
content resulting in insufficient attention being given to student learning. Rote learning practices appear to be the preferred
method of how students engage with subject content. Large student numbers and facility constraints in some subjects
scupper efforts to enhance student-centred learning initiatives.
• There appears to be overlapping subject content between subjects, which points to issues relating to curriculum coherence,
sequencing and pacing. These matters should be addressed during the curriculum review process.
• The scope, depth and degree of complexity of learning to be achieved in some of the subjects were questioned in relation to
the purpose and exit level outcomes of the programme, as well as the needs of industry.
• There appears to be a lack of integration between subjects to support the development of ‘generic’ graduate attributes in the
current curriculum. Attributes such as technological adeptness, the ability to communicate effectively, information literacy
skills and others were regarded as superfluous.

• Mapping of the existing curriculum: Using curriculum mapping as a tool, the intention is to encourage academics to view the
curriculum through what Harden (2001, 125) calls ‘windows’ in the curriculum map. We focused mainly on the following key elements
of a curriculum map namely: the nature and purpose of disciplinary knowledge and skills in the curriculum, learning outcomes,
teaching events, learning activities and assessment tasks (Bester and Scholtz 2012, 293). Information obtained from subject guides
as key source of curriculum information shows the extent of alignment between what is intended (learning outcomes), what is taught
(knowledge and skills), how it is taught (teaching events) and what is experienced by the students (learning activities) and what
students have actually learned (assessment tasks). Table 4 presents these key elements, obtained from subject guides of three
subjects from the programme under investigation.

Table 4: Analysis of curriculum maps of three subjects from the programme under investigation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Learning Outcomes</th>
<th>Body of knowledge and skills</th>
<th>Teaching events</th>
<th>Learning activities</th>
<th>Assessment tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject A</td>
<td>Learning outcomes are detailed, indicating the interconnectivity of the various topics covered. Theory and practical aspects are linked. Critical reflection is required which is appropriate for the level of the subject.</td>
<td>Body of knowledge is linked to case studies and clearly spelled out in the guide. Interrelatedness of the various topics and scaffolding within the subject is clearly spelled out.</td>
<td>Reading required for each lecture is listed. Teaching events in the class are unknown.</td>
<td>Case studies used in each lecture are listed and associated group presentations spelled out.</td>
<td>Formative assessment takes place throughout the course and is linked to activities in the class. Summative assessment takes place during the year consisting of assignments, test and an exam at the end of the year. Detail of the assignments required is spelled out in the guide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Learning Outcomes</td>
<td>Body of knowledge and skills</td>
<td>Teaching events</td>
<td>Learning activities</td>
<td>Assessment tasks</td>
</tr>
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<td>---------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject B</td>
<td>Learning outcomes are cognitive, linked to theory based knowledge. The structure of the subject is text book based and the integration with practical aspects of the topics is unknown. Critical cross field outcomes included are generic and not adjusted to the subject.</td>
<td>Topics cover a variety from basic skills based knowledge to critical reflection on global issues. Higher order thinking is required, especially for the complex issues, but how this type of thinking is promoted in the classroom is unclear.</td>
<td>Teaching events and learning activities listed include: “lecturers”, class discussions”, “self study” and “presentations”. There is no indication as to the topics that will be discussed in the class, nor what the students are required to study on their own or present to the class and/or lecturer. Getting a handle on national hours is difficult with inadequate information in this study guide.</td>
<td>Assessment criteria or activities are not indicated.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject C</td>
<td>Purpose of the subject is a generic statement that does not reflect the uniqueness of the subject. Learning outcomes are written in an elementary format focusing on defining and explanation of the topics at hand. The interaction between topics is unclear.</td>
<td>The body of knowledge reflects standard topics covered in the discipline. The topics are listed as stand-alone, the interaction and interdependency of the topics are not reflected.</td>
<td>Teaching events are listed as “lecture”, “discussion in class”, “Workplace examples”. No indication is given as to what will be discussed in the class or which examples will be used. Readings that could be read and relevant chapters from the text book are not listed.</td>
<td>Assessment is indicated as “Case study” and “Quiz” In addition the students are required to complete assignments and write test, but this is not mentioned in the subject guide.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An analysis of the curriculum maps presented in Table 4 indicates that academics are approaching these three subjects (especially Subject A & C) from a rather narrow technical, product-oriented perspective in terms of the field of study (mainly focusing on roles and functions of management) which will not allow students to gain understanding of broader organisational, social and technological issues within a competitive and changing global management and business perspective. Although Subject B contains a focus on topical issues, the topics are dealt with in isolation. It therefore indicates that an advanced understanding of the dynamic interaction between research, teaching and student learning related to the notion of a reflective professional is not evident in the curriculum orientations of the staff who teach these subjects. The subject guide of Subject A shows that the academic staff member has progressed towards a learning-focused curriculum orientation, while Subject B and C resembles a curriculum-transmitter, teacher-focused orientation, with emphasis on covering various, often unrelated topics.

- **Developing the revised curriculum using curriculum maps:** Acknowledging that curriculum mapping as a process and tool provides a holistic and comprehensive view of the curriculum across all the subject areas and levels of study (Madiba 2011; Oliver, Jones, Tucker and Ferns, 2007) and that it enables academic staff to address key pedagogical issues by fostering debate and reflection, the researchers used curriculum maps as a means of visual communication. Curriculum maps, consisting of the key aspects such as learning outcomes, the knowledge and skills to be acquired, teaching events, learning activities and assessment tasks, allow academics to obtain a holistic view of the curriculum.

Based on the feedback from academic staff, it is evident that these maps generated deep conversations about curriculum, allowed academics to see the individual subjects in relation to the programme as a whole and consider changes to the existing subject structure in a collaborative manner:

Listening to my colleagues also made me realise more just how important a role my subject plays in the bigger scheme of things. It’s good to know that what you’re lecturing is indeed useful, and needed, as well as part of a whole.

A lot of discussion/dialogue is still necessary around the issue of [the] existing curriculum.

Insight into parts of the course/subject that one normally [does] not get into contact with.

See the diploma as a complete unit – how every subject fits in and builds up the diploma ... see the ‘gaps’ that exists in the current program and that those gaps need to be addressed ... see the interaction between subjects and how subjects can compliment one another ... understand that subjects are not standing alone and that cooperation, in form of integrated assessments, should take place ... need to focus more on depth within subject rather than trying to cover too much work.
Curriculum mapping, both as a process and tool, provides a holistic and dynamic view on the curriculum, shaped through active participation from HE teachers.

**Conclusion**

Research (Bester and Scholtz 2012; Madiba 2011; Robertson, Robins and Cox, 2009) has shown that to bring about effective curriculum and pedagogical change within an institution of higher learning, it is important to focus on ways to encourage deep institutional conversations about curriculum. Unless academics are actively involved in such curriculum discussions, they will resort to coping strategies of making superficial changes to their curricula (Sng, 2008, 101) such as re-arranging topics within subjects, adopting a compliance attitude to change and resorting to a product-oriented approach to curriculum and pedagogic practice. To bring about effective curriculum change, it is important to instil an orientation of ‘professing-in-action’, which encourages an understanding of the wider professional and academic context, an ability to manage change as a result of both internal and external factors. Academics’ involvement in a holistic and collaborative approach to curriculum change also elicits a deeper commitment and a stronger sense of ownership. This paper indicates that curriculum mapping both as a process, consisting of various stages of curriculum review and as a tool, representing a visual representation of the curriculum, has the potential of engendering collaborative ways of dealing with curriculum change within an academic department and of establishing a culture of reflective professionalism within an institution.

**List of references**


From Passive to Active - Active learning methods in international human rights law

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Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

Article 26(2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

1. Introduction

For many lecturers teaching human rights law, the topic is not just a topic, but a philosophy of life and a way or method by which we engage with all other law and other aspects of our existence. Whether we approach human rights teaching from a rights-based angle, by addressing questions of the minimum core or by focusing on human dignity, the rights we teach are central to what we teach and should consequently underline how we teach. As a point of departure every student should have a right to a purposeful education, enhancing the dignity of that student. Consequently, students entering a classroom, to learn about human rights (or any other topic), should have the opportunity to experience a diverse set of teaching and assessment methods, actively engaging their minds and challenging them to think critically about the application of the law taught.

The hypothesis that has guided the pilot project introduced and discussed below and the further research presented in this paper is based on the idea that an integrated approach to teaching and assessment will not only create a higher sense of learning where students will retain the information longer; but will also help achieve a sense of equality in the classroom where students have the opportunity to learn in different ways and to show their potential through various forms of dynamic assessment. Furthermore, in transforming the classroom into a more diverse and equal space for learning it is of importance to analyse both the changes necessary to the traditional modes of teaching and the different ways of assessing the students. As suggested by Birenbaum et al. (2006, p. 62) focus should be on assessment for learning instead of assessment of learning.

It is however important to acknowledge, that in the context of higher education, ‘student learning research’ as indicated by Haggis (2009, p. 377) mainly refers to the concepts of ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ approaches to learning as introduced by Marton and Säljö (1984/1997). The discussion in this article is centred on the very same question, as posed by Haggis, ‘why do so many students take a surface approach to learning?’ which for a long period of time has been the default question in the field of Higher Education. However, it is acknowledged that ‘what we know about student learning depends on where we look, and is always a reflection of specific purposes and interests, which are tied to particularities of temporal and spatial contexts’ (Haggis 2009, p 388). Furthermore, we need to critically examine not only the students’ apparent non-engagement but our own ‘culture of teaching’.

Subsequently, this paper analyses the shift from a more traditional way of teaching human rights law (the lecturer as the transmitter of information, one way, in a quiet and organised environment to a hopefully listening and attentive audience); to an interactive, sometimes loud and flowing way of discussing human rights where the lecturer acts as a facilitator and the students drive the contents of the course. The context of this paper is the pilot project, a 4th year elective course in International Law (International Law 451) which will hereafter be referred to as the ‘pilot’. The pilot focused specifically on international human rights law and the protection of human rights on the African continent. Ultimately 27 students participated in the pilot and the discussion below is based on my own experiences in and outside the classroom and the qualitative data (discussed below in section 5) relating to 3 separate questionnaires conducted at the beginning, mid and end of the course.

The different sections of the article, as presented below, are all bound together by my overarching aim to try to increase the critical thinking around human rights law in and outside the classroom and furthermore the motivation to try to create a surge, on behalf of the students, in the enjoyment of learning human rights law. In the following section 2, some of the pedagogic challenges that served as a point of departure for the changes to the teaching and assessment methodologies in the pilot are brought forward and discussed. Section 3 highlights specific teaching and assessment theories that formed the basis for the pilot. Section 4 introduces the structure and contents of the pilot; section 5 analyses some of the input from the students involved and their ideas and impressions of the teaching and assessment methods. Lastly, some lessons learned, from the design of the pilot, are shared and some predictions about the future of active learning and dynamic assessment in international law are made in the concluding remarks.
2. Pedagogical challenges

South Africa is a diverse country from almost any vantage point; linguistic, ethnic, religious and cultural. Hence, in South Africa (and elsewhere) legal educators are often faced with a multiplicity of students from diverse backgrounds. We furthermore come from a recent history of grave human rights violations and segregation making it even more pertinent to not only give our students the best education in human rights law possible but also to work against exclusion and for diversity and transformation in the classroom. Against this backdrop my engagement with alternative learning and assessment methodologies in the pilot was ultimately sparked by the lack of critical thinking taking place in my classroom. The nature of international human rights law is such that it necessitates an understanding of a myriad of perspectives on the law, such as perspectives of international politics, diverse cultures, geo-political differences, gender, class, race, resources and sexuality etc.

The one side of the coin displayed the limited information that I could offer in this regard. The students seldom engaged with the perspectives that I covered in class but rather treated them as factual conditions. Even though I made continuous efforts, every year, to expand my own horizon and to include as many perspectives as I could, it finally struck me that I had to encourage the students to critically engage with the material; and that the students were much better situated to do the ‘updating’ because they had access to sources and resources to which I was barely, to use the terminology of Prensky, an immigrant. As Prensky furthermore concludes in his seminal article ‘Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants’, students ‘think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors’ (2001, p. 1) that is most of us. To try to remedy this, the challenge was to try to encourage the students to share their own perspectives with their peers, allowing them to learn from each other and to actively encourage them to think critically about the different discourses.

The other side of the coin exposed the growing sense that I was missing out on important contributions from the students by subjecting them to tests and exams with a pre-conceived set of limited range questions to answer. I feared that I was over-testing the students in areas where different or no examination was really needed. Furthermore, dealing with a diverse set of students I was always running a greater risk of not interpreting their answers correctly leading to unfairness in marking. As a consequence I decided to not only strive for the creation of more space for critical thinking in my classroom, to add more perspectives and sources; but also to diversify the perspectives of assessment to allow for much more peer review both individually and in groups. Peer assessment is not an uncontroversial form of assessment; however it has been showed by, for example, Boud (2006) that peer assessment works well in professional courses and Race (2001) has indicated that for peer assessment to have the intended outcome, that is a degree of higher learning, much emphasis needs to be put on the development of the assignments and student feedback as well as giving the students the opportunity to peer assess both individual and group tasks. With this in mind and with a view to enhance students’ learning the pilot project set out to offer the students a combination of an active learning experience and dynamic assessment. The latter term has been used to distinguish the integrated process of learning assessment from the traditional static assessment (Pohner & Lantolf, 2003). In the traditional static assessment, the only feedback students receive is in the form of an exam or test score, typically without any additional information about their performance. Dynamic assessment, in contrast, refers to a more embedded nature of assessment in which learning is closely integrated with the assessment of the same. As an addition, any productive legal education should not only develop the skills as related to the specific topic we teach but ultimately contribute to the skills key to anyone in the legal profession such as writing skills, oral skills, the skills of contextualising a legal problem and the skills of presenting a logic argument based on the applicable law. In designing the pilot these skills were carefully considered, in balancing writing assignments with oral presentations and debates in class; all linked with different types of assessments.

3. Active teaching and dynamic assessment methodology

As discussed by Sandhu et al. (2012, p. 1) a number of studies comparing the effectiveness of instructive lectures with those of interactive or active teaching styles has indicated that student satisfaction, learning outcomes, deeper approaches to learning and knowledge retention is better following active learning. One of the acute problems with ‘traditional’ lectures is that students are in a passive mode of learning, which, as analysed by Windschitl (1999, p. 23) and Heward (2003, p. 35) adversely affects their attention and their ability to retain information. As furthermore described by Young et al. (2009, p. 42) such passivity has two potential consequences for the student; it does not facilitate the important deep learning and it can cause decrements in student concentration. Several studies have furthermore showed that students’ attention degrade after between 10 and 30 minutes of lecturing. Various authors such as Horgan (2003, p. 89) and Wankat and Oreovicz (2003, p. 40) advocate mixing up the level of stimulation during lectures in order to offset the attentiveness decrement. The demands should be changed every 10–15 minutes and the source of such variety could be a simple rest, a change in presentation medium, or setting the students a short task (Bligh, 2000; Frederick, 1986; Race & Brown, 1998). However, as pointed out by Young et al. (2012, p. 42) ‘as with vigilance studies in human supervisory control, these interruptions only temporarily restore attention levels and afterwards concentration will decline even more steeply’. The answer clearly does not lie in breaking up a lecture but rather using different techniques for learning.

Viewed from another perspective the problem with conventional lecturing, as pointed out by Mazur, relates to the presentation of the material. Commonly, the material presented comes straight out of textbooks and/or lecture notes, ‘giving students little incentive to attend class’ (2007, p. 6). In this environment it is difficult to provide an adequate opportunity for students to critically think through the arguments being developed. Consequently, according to Mazur, (2007, p. 6) ‘all lectures do is reinforce students’ feeling that the most important step in mastering the material is solving problems’. In Mazur’s opinion the result is ‘a rapidly escalating loop in which the students request more and more example problems (so they can learn better how to solve them), which in turn further reinforces their feeling that the key to success
is problem solving’ (2007, p. 6). Students are too focused on learning ‘recipes,’ or ‘problem-solving strategies’ as they are called in many textbooks, without considering the underlying concepts. This is not problematic only in the field of physics, where Mazur conducted most of his research, but also in the field of law. Hence the basic goals of active learning in its different forms are to exploit student interaction during face-to-face time and focus students’ attention on underlying concepts.

Instead of presenting a traditional lecture the classroom can be ‘flipped’ and the instruction can consist of a number of short presentations on key points (could be done by the students themselves as in the pilot or outside the classroom in the form of podcasts), each followed by, what Mazur (2007, p. 8) refers to as a ‘concept test’. The concept test is a short conceptual test/question on the subject being discussed in class. The students are given time to formulate answers either during class or beforehand and are then asked to discuss their answers with each other. This process forces the students to think through the arguments being developed and provides them (as well as the facilitator) with a way to assess their understanding of the concept i.e. assessment takes place within the realm of the classroom. The students are forced to do the pre-class reading and assignments and the time with the facilitator is spent on elaborating on potential difficulties, deepening understanding, building confidence and adding additional examples. Most of the instruction takes place outside the classroom and/or amongst the students themselves hence the term the ‘flipped classroom’.

In designing the learning and assessment strategy for the pilot, as discussed below, I was inspired by the various findings above but more specifically by Dr Guertin, a geoscience professor at Penn State University, who implemented Just in Time Teaching (JiTT) exercises in an introductory course entitled ‘Dinosaur Extinction and Other Controversies’ (Zappe et al. 2006, p. 4). In her class students were required to submit what she called the “DinoByte” exercises online through a course management system by a deadline before a specified class time. Before class, the facilitator reviewed all the responses to look for common errors, misconceptions and particularly interesting submissions to share with the class. In class the facilitator lead a classroom discussion based on example responses, which were anonymously projected onto a screen. The assignments were graded using a rubric based on the amount of effort and correctness of the items. Individual feedback was given to each student electronically through the course management system. The JiTT assignments were then used in combination with several course projects to determine the final mark. No traditional tests or exams were administered. The weekly exercises were designed to encourage higher-order thinking skills in students, requiring critical thinking, synthesis, evaluation and analysis.

This example clearly indicates that for the student to reap the full benefit of active learning it has to be coupled with a suitable assessment structure. In order to facilitate student understanding of the material, ideal classroom assessments should not only provide information on whether students are learning, but should also be exercises from which students can learn (Wolf, 1993). This typically blurs the line between assessment and learning. Smaller, more frequent assignments can be used to track the progress of students’ understanding as well as being potential learning experiences for the students. In these types of exercises, as put forward by Zappe et al. (2006, p. 1), ‘the question of whether the assignment is one of assessment or teaching becomes unanswerable’. Rather, these assignments intertwine the aspects of student learning and assessment.

The more practical motivation behind shifting from the common practice of assessment to a dynamic method was to firstly diversify and integrate the methods of assessment; secondly to start assessment earlier in the semester; thirdly to assess over the whole period instead of, as previously, mainly towards the end; and lastly to lower the level of stress on behalf the students. With regard to the diversity and equality aspects, as discussed in the introduction, it was also important to make the students feel that they were all involved in the assessment.

4. The pilot

With regard to the basic structure and contents of the pilot it is of importance to firstly note that all materials discussed in class was presented by the students themselves. Secondly, the whole structure of the course was built around a hypothetical case that would change from year to year (case based teaching). Due to my engagement in the Annual African Human Rights Moot Court Competition the hypothetical case presented in relation to this competition served as the course structure. The students taking part in the competition in 2012 or students that had taken part previously, not necessarily students in class, were also invited to participate and to, by the end of the semester, share their experiences of the moot court with the students in class. The hypothetical case served as a good point of departure for the students to engage with ‘real life’ scenarios that helped them understand and apply the law. Furthermore, the involvement of the students actively taking part in the moot court and discussing the case from the perspective of ‘preparing’ the two students involved in the competition also brought about a sense of ‘unity’ and a feeling that we were all heading towards a common goal i.e. preparing the competitors for our faculty to do well in the competition. The seminars, 2 consecutive hours a week, were facilitated by myself and invited guest facilitators. Materials were provided in the form of bundles, acting as a basis for the students’ engagement with the legal issues as presented in the hypothetical case. However, students were encouraged to engage with other materials and to make suggestions to their peers with regard to other sources that could be of relevance. The interactive webpage of the course offered the possibility of the creation of a ‘pool’ of additional sources and during the course of the semester a library was created consisting of PowerPoint presentations, video and audio clips, articles, movies and other materials posted online.

During the first seminar, information about the structure of the course and the assessment were discussed and the students were divided into groups of 3-4 students. A rubric was used for all assessment conducted by myself and by the students using peer-review. The rubric was discussed in class and the students themselves had the opportunity to contribute to it. The idea behind the rubric was to help the
students become thoughtful evaluators of their own and others’ work and it was of importance that they felt that they knew exactly how they were going to be evaluated and what benchmarks would be used. To create a functional and transparent rubric, models of ‘good’ versus ‘not-so-good’ work were discussed in class both with regard to written submissions and oral presentations. Examples of different quality work were provided, for students to review in class. After the first peer review we returned to this discussion and revised some of the criteria of the rubric on the basis of the feedback. At the end of the semester my work was assessed by the students using a similar rubric.

During the second seminar students that had previously participated in the above mentioned moot court were invited to help us tease out the different legal questions from the hypothetical case and to arrange them into 7 different topics. In class the students actively participated in the design of the course content and decided, departing from the hypothetical case, what areas of the law that we would have to focus on during the semester to be able to argue the case (student involvement in course design). Each group were responsible for conducting further research into the topic allocated to them and to present relevant background information, the legal question(s), the relevant references to regional and international human rights law and possible ways of arguing around their specific issues. Each group was furthermore encouraged to pay particular attention to possible remedies to be suggested to the court and possible arguments presented against such remedies. It was furthermore made clear to the students that they were being assessed as a group and that the team spirit and performance was part of the value of their contribution.

In the following 7 weeks each student group presented a 30 minutes talk, mini-moot court or PowerPoint presentation on each of the topics. Students were encouraged to come up with innovative ways of transferring information to their peers and to focus on ways of learning that they would find interesting and favourable (active learning/flipped classroom). Each group was asked to go through the case thoroughly to try to put forward as many convincing arguments (merits/procedure) as possible for the applicant and the respondent as well as substantiating these arguments. The presentation could involve the sources in the bundle but students were encouraged, as discussed above, to make use of other sources as well as other means of communicating the information. The mark for the presentation consisted of 50 per cent facilitator’s review / 50 per cent peer review; and after each presentation the student groups making up the audience convened for 10 minutes in the classroom to discuss the presentation and mark it in accordance with the rubric (as discussed above). The mark of each group was then handed to me and a final mark (facilitator + peer review) for the presentation was obtained (instant feedback). After the peer review 10 minutes was set aside for constructive feedback to the presenting group, discussing what was positive and what could have improved the presentation even further (additional skills).

Importantly, the group presenting was moreover asked to put forward 4-5 legal issues/questions (LawBytes) that they found to be of key importance to their topic or issues that they struggled with that they would like to present to the class for further discussion (JiTT). These questions were sent to me via e-mail a few days before class. The task of the facilitator was then to engage with the issues/questions and try to distil multiple choice questions/discussion topics for all students to work with as pre-class assignments to be discussed at the second hour of the seminar. In generating the pre-class assignments I also had the opportunity to add issues that needed further attention.

The student generated LawBytes were made available to the other students on the interactive webpage two days before class for the other students to engage with together with the prescribed materials. All students were asked to hand in their exercises, electronically within 24 hours. The LawBytes were marked by myself every second week and bi-weekly the students marked the assignments in class using the rubric. In the beginning of the semester all students were given a number to identify each student in relation to their assignments. This was done so that the LawByte exercises could be discussed and marked in class without anyone feeling uncomfortable and without any bias from my side in marking the assignments.

During the seminar all students were asked to discuss the LawByte exercise in their respective groups and together we tried to flesh out an answer(s) (active learning/flipped classroom). The LawBytes were used as a point of departure for the discussion in class and polls were conducted using colour cards. We polled and re-pollled until we came to a conclusion, often leaving the students with more than one applicable scenario or perceived ‘right’ answer. Some weeks the question(s) were more suitable for group discussions in class where the questions were broken down into smaller entities sometimes coupled with relevant case law. After these exercises the students (bi-weekly) marked the exercise sheet given to them (a printout version of the exercises as handed in electronically).

Furthermore, to deepen the sense of case based learning and as an addition to the case discussion in class each student was asked to prepare a memorial (heads of argument or written pleadings of 4000 words) in support of the case of the applicant or the respondent in the hypothetical case. Half of the class wrote on behalf of the applicant and the other half on behalf of the respondent. This assessment required the students to continuously engage with the materials throughout the semester. The presentations and seminars were held to aid students in completing this assignment. The memorials were marked using a similar but modified rubric, than the one used for the oral presentations, to cater for the written format.

In summary, the assessment system in the pilot was interlinked with the different ideas of active learning (as discussed in this article). It was built around four different types of assessment with two different types of assessors: an oral presentation (group assignment), small but frequent exercises with instant feedback (LawBytes), a written assignment in the form of memorials for the parties to the fictive case and end-assessment, together creating an individual portfolio of each of the students. The central idea was to present the students with different, integrated, methods of learning and assessment to enable them to express their individual talents and to take focus off the
traditional year-end examination. The approach was furthermore an attempt to offer students assessment on a more limited materials at a time to make sure that they had understood the components necessary to understand and correctly apply the law taught before moving on to the next step. Each assessment opportunity was therefore built on the previous assessment and linked up with the following. The different parts of the assessment, as described above, created the contents of the student’s portfolio and all parts formed part of the final performance mark.

5. The qualitative data

As mentioned in the introduction three different surveys were conducted in class for the purpose of understanding how the students perceived the new learning and assessment methods. Even if the data is limited the scope of this article is too narrow to analyse the qualitative outcomes of this research in detail, but a few indicators and challenges will be discussed. Firstly, it was notable that most students were positive in general towards the introduction of active learning. The majority suggested that similar techniques should be used in other subjects and that the case based method helped them better understand the topic.

However, it was clear that they distrusted themselves as conveyers of ‘accurate’ information through the oral presentations and as assessors conducting peer-review in class. Although they felt involved and comfortable to discuss a specific topic in class they did not find that they could rely on the information if it was not ‘certified’ by me as the ‘authority’. I would often receive questions after class with regard to the presentations held in class querying the correctness of the information and in the overwhelming majority of cases the information presented by the students themselves was both accurate and well formulated. Furthermore, the majority of students responded that they did not trust their peers to review them objectively, ‘as would the lecturer’. Interestingly, for the seven oral group presentations that were held and peer-reviewed in the pilot the difference between the marks given by me and the students peer-reviewing the group presenting never differed more than five per cent and for five out of the seven presentations the difference was less than two per cent (in both directions).

Another interesting observation was that even though there were some very innovative ways of presenting the materials most groups choose to duplicate what most lecturers do in class namely to speak to a PowerPoint presentation, one student after the other. This will probably be one of the most difficult challenges for next year’s class, to not replicate the loss of student engagement in having the students themselves mimic the stereotyped behaviour of a lecturer transmitting information one way (that I was trying to get rid of in the first place). Lastly, a striking feature observed in all three surveys and in class was that once faced with the ‘LawBytes’ exercises in class, exposing a number of possibilities of how to structure a valid argument, the majority of students could not let go of the idea that there had to be one solution, a yes or a no, a right and a wrong answer, as pointed out by Mazur above. This was the most important lesson for me as it indicated that we are currently, to a great extent, fostering an environment in class where we profess to have all the right answers and that there is often only one solution.

6. Concluding remarks

Active learning and dynamic assessment is all about equality in learning human rights law. Different methods suit different students and in South Africa, and elsewhere, legal educators are faced with a diversity of students from many different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds, as discussed above. The overarching objective behind the shift in teaching methods in the pilot was therefore not only to increase the depth of the learning but to also, through different teaching and assessment methods, reach a multiplicity of students and by doing so also promote and protect human rights amidst the students.

Switching from being a lecturer to a facilitator did not reduce my work load, it rather transformed it; and it has certainly helped me view human rights law through a much more critical lens. I quite often receive the question from colleagues ‘but if you don’t teach what do you do?’ What I have learnt throughout this process is that active learning is a much more rewarding and enriching experience for me as an academic because I constantly have to push against my own boundaries and I have to venture far outside the comfort zone of my lecture notes and slides. Leading a discussion based on LawBytes or trying to tease out the problem areas in the students’ exercises is far more demanding than a ‘traditional lecture’. Furthermore, this shift has in many ways helped me conceive new topics for my own research.

Initially the combination of JITT, peer-instruction and peer-review with dynamic assessment resulted in an increase of my work-load. After engaging with other lecturers’ experiences through articles and the Peer-Instruction Network it seems to be a manageable process which gets easier with time and experience. As stated by a law lecturer at Adelaide University that re-designed her course using JITT and peer-instruction, ‘the information from the assessment energized [my] presentation and that although it seemed to be a lot of work […] it was worth it […] I believe the preparation will get easier as I develop greater familiarity with the method’ (Carrington and Green 2007, p. 131). The dynamic approach to assessment furthermore allows me to distribute the marking over the whole semester instead of fixing the marking to a short period during test and examination times. This enables me to put much more focus on the individual student and it most importantly allows me to detect low performing students early in the semester. I believe that even though some students indicated in their questionnaires that they felt nervous about their presentations in class, this system will lower the stress level overall of the students because the assessment is done in segments on a weekly basis.
Finally, for the future of this project the main challenges are to encourage the students to believe in their own abilities and to de-mystify the position of the lecturer in favour of the many important opinions and perspectives present in the student group. If we are to fulfil the objective of the UDHR, that introduced the discussion in this article, we have to not only strive for the promotion and protection of human rights in our teaching but by our teaching enable our students to secure the universal and effective recognition and observance of the said rights.

(Endnotes)

1. ‘Diverse’ referring to linguistic background, ethnicity, nationality and sexual orientation.
4. The course referred to as the ‘Pilot’ was International Law 451, as given at the Faculty of Law University of Stellenbosch. It was taught in two consecutive hours a week in the second semester of 2012. 27 students participated in class, in 8 different seminars.
5. The assessment structure is rigid in the sense that the students had to hand in 7 out of 8 LawByte exercises and participate in the oral presentation to be marked to receive a 50% pass mark for the module. However if a student was sick or absent for another legitimate reason it was possible for me to set up (a) separate exercise(s) for the relevant student(s) towards the end of the semester if necessary and allow students to participate in the oral preparations and presentations of another group that the one the student was originally allocated to. It was furthermore possible to conduct separate orals for students that had missed out on the oral presentations of their group.
6. The strength of the flexible approach rests on the combination of assessment methods, the assessment over the whole duration of the semester and the opportunity to monitor progress over time. Therefore the creation of a portfolio for each student gives them control over their assessment. The students are in charge of their portfolios and are aware at all times what are expected of them and what their positions are.
7. The final performance mark was calculated in the following way: (a) Oral presentation: 30% of the final performance mark, group assignment with 50% instructor’s review / 50% peer review, students had to participate in the oral presentation to obtain a 50% pass mark; (b) LawBytes 30% of the final performance mark and the students had to hand in 7 out of 8 of the LawByte exercises to obtain a 50% pass mark; (c) Written assignment: 30% of the final performance mark 50% instructor’s review / 50% peer review; (d) and end-assessment 10% of the final performance mark. With regard to the end-assessment it was only used because the rules of the university does not allow for this type of assessment to be entirely abolished. It consisted of a traditional test covering a specific area of the topic as communicated to the students in advance. I was aware of the fact that the low percentage of the end-assessment would probably not encourage students to participate in the end-assessment if they had already performed well in the course. However, the focus of the course was not on the end-assessment because it was not an integrated part of the active learning as with the rest of the assessment. The idea behind the pilot was to relate the assessment to active learning through the methods indicated above. In this sense the end-assessment constituted traditional static assessment and not dynamic assessment which was in focus.
8. These surveys consisted of 3 sets of questionnaires and was handed out in the beginning, mid and end of the semester; generating in total 60 responses.
9. Out of the 24 questionnaires that were collected in the first round 16 answered yes to the question ‘Would you encourage other lecturers in other subjects to adopt the same teaching model?’, 5 answered no and 3 yes with certain qualifications such as wanting case based teaching but not oral presentations.
Bibliography


In the Mi(d)st of: knowledge as embodied paradox

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Abstract

As an educator interacting primarily with the individual human being as creative agent, engaging critically with the three-fold motivation of science - to explain, to predict and to control (Chu, Strand and Jelland 2003) - must of necessity create discomfort and unease. Current theories of complexity, cognition and performance practices acknowledge that divisions attributed to living systems are artefacts of how they were questioned or conditioned, rather than inevitable features of the systems themselves. Perceiving both student-learners and the bodies of knowledge they engage with as inert objects, defined by materially-determinable features alone, is to miss the evolutionary potential of both. When perceived as a process of sense-making or making sense, knowledge generation must necessarily include repeated critical engagement with contradictory or ambiguous phenomena, and the recursive embodiment of paradox (ideally to the advantage of both individual and community). As such, treating knowledge generation as structural (with definitive spatio-temporal boundaries) rather than organizational (with fluid, permeable and context-specific spatio-temporal boundaries) seems ineffective. By acknowledging Levine’s (2000) arts-based research approach to knowledge generation, namely that to understand is to stand in the midst of, or to stand in the presence of, this paper aims to address how educators might create the conditions necessary for student-learners to remain present to the emergence of context-specific knowledge.

When I re-read my abstract in preparation for writing this paper, I was astounded by my audacity – by my sense of knowing what I intended to talk about, and more significantly my conviction about how I was going to do this what. I reeled at my own assertive statements that I would “address how educators might create the conditions necessary for student-learners to remain present to the emergence of context-specific knowledge”. Was I really going to do that? How? Even my conservative insertion of a qualitative “might” did not dilute the confidence with which the statement appeared to me.

Nevertheless, I contained my fear and astonishment, and began constructing a possible argument – a linear sequence of coherent, equally convincing, statements - to support my initial proposition. As I was writing it became clear to me that one of the reasons for my fear, astonishment and abashment was that my proposal was dependent on an-other – embedded and unavoidable - proposal, and that this was the true intention motivating my writing: I realized that to address how educators might create the conditions necessary for student-learners to remain present to the emergence of context-specific knowledge, would require addressing how educators might create the conditions necessary for themselves to remain present to the emergence of context-specific knowledge within their own learning – and that the former would effectively be equivalent to creating the necessary conditions for the latter.

So pushing my fears of audacity aside, I want to make the following bold statement: as long as an educator is no longer concerned with their own learning, they will fail to activate a process of learning in their students. This statement may appear obvious to many: of course, educators are always improving on what they know about their subject matter – attending conferences, reading books, writing articles, attending symposia and workshops – but the learning I am referring to does not only refer to learning about a shared subject matter – which implies a binary perceptual orientation of a learner as a fixed and bounded observer receiving information from something outside of themselves which is equally fixed and bounded. The emphasis, rather, is on “their own learning”; that is, reflecting on and remaining critical of how they personally learn, the specific means whereby, which must include acknowledging in what way, and to what degree, their learning about a subject matter changes how they learn (for better or worse). When this statement is inverted (a strategy or practice that I will discuss further on), it reveals a recognition of knowledge generation as context-specific in particular, as well as a humbling acknowledgement that in their continued learning, educators inevitably run the risk of outgrowing or transcending the very subject matter...
and method of learning they have historically relied on. When knowledge generation is perceived not solely as a passive, direct, linear and undisturbed gathering of already and readily available information, and rather as a creative process of particular making sense whereby embedded, remembered, collected and apparent information (even that considered potentially contradictory or ambiguous) is synthesized by an individual learner through selective action under certain conditions, then as an educator I may be confronted with a paradox: that the successful learning of my students should contain a reference to my own failure, since what I know and articulate about a particular subject matter is necessarily limited, flawed, inadequate, incorrect from the perspective of everything there is possibly to know about a subject matter by means of how it comes to be known by others. Many may take this statement to mean that I am advocating knowledge generation as only and wholly subjective; if it is true that our observations, predictions and controlling mechanisms of reality are so personal, subjective, relative and variable then does it not beg the question: why teach at all?

But I share the viewpoint of Carrie Noland (2009), as she emphasizes in her book Agency & Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture, that it is not only possible, but preferable, to speak of differentials, rather than differences, when dealing with the perception, cognition and actions of individual living systems. Differentials accommodate degrees of difference in such a way that similarity, synergy, equivalence, overlap, collaboration, convergence, resonance and association are not only theoretically possible, but organically probable, so that contexts of shared enquiry can be more readily and organically recognized. The process of becoming aware of differentials - accessing the resources to discern and support subtle and miniscule variations in the way that individuals make sense of reality - and then offering conditions under which these differentials may bump against each other and recondition their shared boundaries without losing their integrity, is a skill requiring ongoing practice. This is the ongoing practice, the life-long learning, which I referred to earlier as being the key for educators to remaining present to emergent knowledge. For educators to truly teach others, they can not only mimic existing artefacts and structures of knowledge, but must understand – stand in the midst of – their own process of knowing. It is my firm belief, based on personal experience, that when an educator (supervisor, teacher or lecturer) is able to model this awareness of evolving differentials in their own actions (in the means whereby they organize their chosen subject matter(s) into lectures, classes, assessments, tasks, projects) then the conditions will have been organically created for students to remain present to their emergent knowledge.

I will return now to the strategy of inversion I mentioned earlier, a strategy that has been informed by my readings into neurocognition, evolutionary psychology, complexity, ecology, Zen Buddhism, performance theory, and quantum physics, refined in discussion with my husband and mentor Lanon Carl Prigge, and implemented in the movement and physical theatre curriculum at the University of Stellenbosch Drama Department: simply stated, in this context it means that what a student assumes to know, an educator should assume they do not know; and what a student assumes not to know, an educator should assume they do know. Simply stated, but more complex in practice. This is not simply a reference to tacit knowledge – of education as a process of getting bits of knowledge assumed to be inherent, forgotten, or latent, out. As Richard Dawkins in The Blind Watchmaker (1986, 170) highlights, biologists studying DNA have become aware that genetic information is not stored as bits of matter in a fixed location:

> The long-lived gene as an evolutionary unit is not any particular physical structure but the textual archival information that is copied on down the generations. This textual replicator has a distributed existence. It is widely distributed in space among different individuals, and widely distributed in time over many generations.

The same is true of memory: perceptions of memories as being photocopies of events, people, places stored in a single location have been challenged, with more recent theories (Goldberg, 2005; Winston, 2003) suggesting that a memory is the result of a composite of information accessed from diverse locations, not only within the brain but within other parts of the organism as well, and it is to larger or lesser degrees different each time it is recalled because information from different locations is being retrieved and re-membered (organized). Information technology works on similar principles of storage, retrieval and computation of information that is widely, even disparately, distributed.

It thus seems more useful for educators and learners to perceive of knowledge generation as recursive in-formation - a spherical (rather than linear or circular) process of enquiry, enactment and realization – a simultaneous and dynamic combination of nesting, embedding, recalling, extracting, exposing and enacting. Such a process necessarily relies on interactions with living systems outside of the learner, to the extent that the process will be in-formed by these interactions. “Rely” because to a large extent these particular actions by which sense is made do not occur naturally, inevitably, spontaneously but require activation, and it is the external conditions that will determine whether or not this activation occurs. The explanation offered by Dawkins (1986, 170) of the evolutionary potential of the gene offers further insight:

> The particular effects that genes have are not intrinsic properties of those genes. They are the properties of embryological processes, existing processes whose details may be changed by genes, acting in particular places and at particular times during embryonic development.

This suggests that it is not possible for any two educators - even when they share similarities in subject matter, methodology and social environment - to generate the same knowledge in/for a student since the means whereby what is being taught is differentially handled and mirrored to the student will to a large extent determine what the student is learning about. This statement appears redundant to the point of being fallacious, what scientists and philosophers avoid - a circular argument; but this is the true shape of learning as an evolutionary intention and can’t be avoided or denied when dealing with living systems. Complexity thinker and theorist Robert Rosen (in Edmonds 2007) refers to living systems that are involved in a modelling or learning process of some kind as ‘anticipatory systems’, and Edmonds...
(2007, 239) highlights the difficulty associated with accurately observing and precisely predicting and controlling such phenomena. But just because it is difficult does not mean it is impossible, nor unworthy of rigorous attention; it does, however, require a softer touch, a more expansive and accommodating process of handling that acknowledges the significant role that permeability and process, dissolution and disillusionment, distortion and distraction, play in the individual learning process.

In the spirit of theatre and performance, I would like to make use of a personal aside here: I overheard a woman in the gym the other day (I go for the steam room, not the step machine) saying: ‘She will have to realize that she is such-and-such and that she can’t so-and-so’. Her statement had the same forceful and fallacious thinking behind it as advertisements that state: “Learn to meditate – NOW!”

There is no have to when it comes to true learning. As precursors and signifiers of embodied knowledge, I understand realizations to be unpredictable, particular and context-specific: they are the outcome of an individual’s exposure to, and self-determined (if not always self-aware) engagement with, catalysts and conditions; and they cannot emerge solely from loyal adherence to generic techniques and repeatable methods, or prescriptive temporal and spatial frameworks. Realizations arrive unannounced; they cannot be coerced.

It is thus possible for living systems to be exposed repeatedly to new information, and yet to remain unchanged by it. As complexity thinkers are well aware, diversity and difference do not inevitably evolve into complexity. J M Alexander understood the evolutionary potential of the human being when he developed and refined the Alexander technique, a somatic enquiry into habitual and ineffective behavior. Alexander practitioner Glen Parks in The Art of Changing (1989, 66) observes that the brain is concerned with changes in the muscles, joints and tendons; when muscles become chronically shortened because of inactivity or imbalanced activity, this state is interpreted as ‘normal’ by the brain.

My involvement in site-specific performance has offered meaningful and effective concepts and strategies for consideration in this regard. Unlike traditional theatre productions that are usually interpretations of existing scripts presented on proscenium arch stages, the materials (text, movement, sounds, props, narrative, audience interactions) for a site-specific performance are generated in direct response to, and within, a particular environment that exists outside of a conventional theatre space. Site-specific theorists and practitioners (for example, Hunter in Butterworth and Wildschut 2009) thus make distinctions between space and place, map and journey, reaction and response – all the former allude to interpretations of living systems that have become fixed, static, bound in time and place, and thus only capable of evoking an equivalent fixity and stasis of meaning in their observer/spectator. The latter allude to interpretations of living systems that acknowledge the formlessness of their formality, the folly of their perceived attempts to control, the variability and context-specificity contained in their perceived fixity. These are understood to only come alive in their interactions with others - and in their interactions with others they are irrevocably changed. They literally change before your very eyes.

It is often the case that educators bemoan the fact that students change their minds – that they appear one way at the start of an academic year, and end up contrary to this at the end of the year; that the essay they hand in at the end of a semester has little in common with the proposal they handed in at the start of the semester; that they do brilliantly in one task or project, only to fail dismally in the next. This has become an increasingly strange reaction for me to understand in the context of teaching and learning: is change not the ultimate signifier that learning is taking place? In my own case, students that remain constant and unchanging make me nervous – on behalf. I anticipate the day that all their learnt behavior, what is known to them and is repeatedly iterated as known, and recorded or marked as accomplished and intelligent, will be revealed for what it is – a dusty relic, an artefact – interesting when perceived under certain past conditions but antithetical to the unyielding focus considered necessary for intellectual rigor, the result of faulty predictions and lenient control mechanisms, an indicator of ignorance or naïvety in their selected discipline, then their neurological pathways are bound to become increasingly fixed. And this fixity cannot evoke or inspire the fluidity necessary for learning in those around them.

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Acknowledging that the real learning of students takes place within and around, inside and outside of, because of and in spite of, prescribed tasks, scheduled assessments and allocated marks; that effective learning is life-long and context-specific; that what students do and do not learn, do and do not know, is not a reflection of what an educator does or does not know, but a reflection of the extent to which learners can come to know how an educator has come to know what they know - is not an act of passivity or resignation, not motivated by a desire for a lack of engagement, a laziness or apathy, but is rather an embodiment of a paradoxical evolutionary principle – the economy of effort.
At this point, I realize that the bravado of my original abstract might have given the impression that I would be offering reputable techniques, reliable methods, tried and tested strategies and mechanisms to predict and control how educators may manage their own teaching and learning environment to allow learners to stay present to emergent knowledge. But as Van der Vijver and Van Poucke (2008, 23) state:

If you don’t give up the idea of an identifiable, intrinsically non-functional material basis, not only will you not be able to recover organization afterwards, you will have lost it in an irretrievable way.

In this I can only offer what theatre practitioner Jerzy Grotowski (2002) has offered performance practitioners and educators: via negativa, or the technique of non-technique, and so reveal my faith in a knowing that transcends my personal knowledge – a faith that as soon as I am able to question what I know, to view it critically and light-heartedly, that is what needs to be known and acted upon, presently and further, will reveal itself. My particular philosophy of teaching and learning, then, is to treat each student as a work of art, an emergent technology – unfinished and unfinish-able, unresolved and unresolve-able, contradictory, ambiguous, ambivalent; and to afford myself the same luxury.

(Endnotes)

1. To include an extensive list here would be impractical. However, emerging world-views and approaches that integrate and summarise these diverse strands of thought, and reflect what I have paid particular attention to in my own practise-as-research, include: David Deutsch (1997), Richard Dawkins (1986), Carrie Noland (2009), Jerzy Grotowski (in Christoffersen, 1993 and 2002) and Michael Talbot (1991).

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Making English Communication Skills (ECS) at the University of Venda more relevant

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper was to review the module, English Communication Skills (ECS), in response to concerns raised about its nature and impact by both ECS and discipline-specific lecturers. ECS, an English language literacy module is required by all disciplines in the University of Venda (Univen). The review indicated that ECS is designed along recognised theoretical conceptions but that practicalities around ECS’s implementation were adversely affecting its impact on students’ discourse construction abilities. What was recommended is an eclectic theoretical and practical strategies approach within a broader new literacies approach to achieve the aims.

INTRODUCTION

Issues around the relevance of ECS have surfaced strongly and there is a general discontent with the level of English control of students even after exposure to ECS. Content lecturers are critical of the ECS curriculum and although they acknowledge a need for student support, their concern is whether ECS is offering relevant support. This necessitated a call for a review of the course to ensure a fit between the profile (both academic and social) of the Univen students, discipline-specific language needs, quality assurance, and the current notions of academic support.

Univen situated in the Limpopo province of South Africa, is a regional university with the majority of students coming from rural homes with minimal educational resources. Their pre-tertiary education is also characterised by teachers who, because of various reasons such as, lack of expertise, resources, non-collaboration between the home and school, certain teaching and learning styles cannot adequately assist in the development of students’ academic discourse structure in the language of instruction, English. ICSA (2002) and Weideman (2003a) give a list of descriptors for students who are ready to create tertiary discourse. A similar list has been compiled by authors like Yeld, Cliff and Hanslo (2002) as cited in Ratangee, 2007 and Foxcroft, (2004). A cursory examination of these characteristics shows the need for students to operate at certain levels of cognition, have ability to manipulate text, create new knowledge and have rudimentary numerical background. In addition, they must have micro skills in the four skills of English language, phonology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics, which should culminate in the creation of an appropriate tertiary discourse. Strengthening these qualities is what ECS attempts to do.

Former disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) with their more compensatory ethos operate more liberal policies which necessitates support modules for students either at the beginning or throughout their stay in attempts to enhance students’ academic literacy (AL), in particular, in discourse creation. Enhancing discourse creation within an institution’s setting, according to Ballard and Clanchy (1988) implies learning to ‘read’ the culture of the place and coming to terms with its unique rituals, values, style of language and behaviour. Although there can be minimum disagreement with Ballard and Clanchy on the above point (ibid), translating AL into an actual programme of classroom support for individual student profiles has always posed problems for institutions, Univen included.

Background to the Problem

Univen, in addressing the discourse creation needs of its students, offers a language support course, ECS, in the Department of English. ECS is a compulsory university course offered over two semesters, ideally for all first year students. However, students who fail it in their first year are allowed to repeat it alongside their second or third year programmes. Successful completion of the course is a prerequisite for completing any study programme at Univen.

ECS consists of two modules of 15 weeks each. Module one is a generic, grammar-oriented and study skills course, while the second module consists of six electives which broadly reflect the seven Schools in the Univen (Human and Social Sciences, Management Sciences, Law, Environmental Sciences, Agriculture, Health and Natural and Mathematical Sciences). The aims for the generic module are:
• To improve students’ communication skills, i.e. reading, listening, writing and oral abilities;
• To improve students language proficiency;
• To improve students’ general and visual comprehension;
• To improve students’ performance in analysing and interpreting texts;
• To acquaint students with the latest technology, by introducing them to computers via a programme of computer-mediated teaching;
• To foster self-discipline and self-reliance amongst students by allowing them to exercise their own discretion and determine their own pace when working on the computer;
• To enhance students’ skills so that they are able to gather material and synthesise pieces of information into a coherent whole; and
• To equip, ultimately, the students with different skills and competencies in order to identify and overcome the socio-economic and vocational problems of the region.

A comparison between Weideman’s (2003a) list and support courses for other tertiary institutions, like, Pretoria, University of Cape Town, Cape Peninsula, University of Limpopo, and the aims/content of ECS, show conceptual similarities. A characteristic of the above list is that there is no precise detailing of what students should be able to do after each of the aims; the aims are broad and not refined and they also incorporate some elements of study skills. It can be assumed that if the Univen students are exposed to this module and successfully internalise the aims, they should enhance their AL which, in turn, should result in better academic discourse creation.

**Problem statement**

In an environment where only about 10% of the students are not first generation scholars; where the teachers in the rural schools teach English in the local language; where the language of socialisation on the Univen campus is not English; where 90% of the staff (academic, administration and service) speak Tshivenda, support instruction in English literacy is quite challenging, hence ECS which tries to offer language support is always in the spotlight.

The relevance of ECS is constantly being debated and there is a general discontent with the level of English control of students even after exposure to ECS. Departments claim that the course does not bring about any marked transformation in the students. Although content lecturers are critical of the ECS curriculum, they do acknowledge the need for students to be supported in the creation of academic discourse. However their concern is that ECS is not impacting students visibly.

Whether this is a fair comment is open to debate, as sometimes the impact of an intervention strategy may take years to manifest itself. The argument of these departments is that the immediate purpose of this academic support is to assist students to acquire enough academic tools to enable them to engage with the contents of tertiary specialisation. Long term linguistic development may occur in these students once they have left the university. For these departments, such development is incidental as currently they are still faced with under-prepared students.

If students, after completion of the ECS course still face challenges in discourse creation, then questions have to be asked and answers found. Although a survey was conducted to elicit ECS and discipline-specific concerns about ECS, only comments from the ECS lecturers have informed this paper. This decision was taken because most of the non-ECS lecturers’ comments were more pertinent to the second semester electives while this review focuses more on the generic first semester module. ECS lecturers have articulated some concerns which they believe are affecting the achievement of the aims and which should provide the context in which any recommendations can be considered. Some of the concerns are:

• The number of students per ECS groups is too large for effective AL enhancement. Such large numbers affect the delivery of the course as no individual attention can be given to students. At the moment there are only 8 lecturers in the ECS section. With a student count of ± 3000, this means each lecturer is responsible for nearly 400 students. This ratio may be sustainable in situations where acquiring content is the main objective, but in a skills-orientated academic support, such figures adversely affect the course.
• The obvious differences in discourse-creation abilities of the students taking ECS necessitates lecturers aiming for the ‘middle ground’, a situation which may be unsatisfactory to the whole class.
• Even though ECS is an academic support course, students do not have to register for the course in their first year. As a core course, students just need a pass in it to graduate; when the course is taken is immaterial. This means there are some students engaging in the bulk of their studies without the preparatory skilling of ECS.
• Students seem to have challenges with transferability of concepts mastered to application situations like presentations, essays writing and research reporting.
• The lack of tutorials affects the delivery of ECS which, in turn, affects the course’s impact on the students. Language is a skill and needs to be practised. This is not possible with the large ECS classes.

ECS, thus, operates on the concept that improvement in study skills and discreet global attributes, such as those listed above would enable students’ broader application of them in diverse contexts. This is the context in which ECS operates and the starting point of any strategies to create a fit between the profile (both academic and social) of the Univen students and the discipline-specific language needs, quality assurance and the current notions of academic support. The relevant question at this juncture is: **How then can the course be restructured to achieve its stated aims?**
Of course an obvious answer lies, among others, in a relook by the English Department of its definition of ‘academic discourse’ and the notion of ‘support’, ECS’ teaching and learning strategies as well as regulations in Univen.

AIM

The aim of the study is to review ECS in response to some of the concerns emerging from a survey conducted among both ECS and discipline-specific lectures. The focus of the examination will, therefore, be on the comments articulated in the problem statement.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Issues of academic discourse creation fall under the broad umbrella of academic literacy (AL). AL can be seen as the ‘codes’ (Bourdieu, Passeron, & de Saint Martin, 1994), ‘conventions’ (Ballard and Clanchy, 1988, 7-23), ‘ground-rules...norms and values and principles’ which govern both social and academic interactions. The standards for what constitutes ‘literacy’ vary from one context to another. To the uninitiated, the notion of AL conjures up a single attribute involving the decoding and encoding of meaning which learners have or do not have; this is far from the reality (Street 1995; Gee, 1990). AL consists of complex, multidimensional attributes and possession of them affects the learners’ total handling of social and academic norms.

AL is naturally closely related to language and discourse creation; in fact it is quite difficult to separate the two. Whether you take language as an external demonstration of cognition or cognition as demonstration of the presence of language, certain levels of discourse are only possible with certain levels of language competence. These abilities have been narrowed to technical skills, inference, concept formation and critical thinking in accordance with the literature on literacy (Bachman & Palmer, 1994; Foxcroft, 2004).

Although debates exist as to the best form for imparting technical knowledge and ensuring its application, no school of thought has dismissed the importance of grammar in discourse (Burns, & de Silva, 1998; Burns, 2003; Zhang, 2009). Poor attention to grammar requirements will result in unacceptable discourse in whatever context. Attention to technical details ensures acceptable discourse which is created with ease and professionalism.

Inference or the non-literal aspect of discourse is an area focused upon, not only in semantics but also extensively in pragmatics under theories such as Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) and implicature (Grice 1967). Experience has shown that language usage beyond the sentence and into text is a regular feature of discourse competence. Inferential ability is based on learners’ ability to handle and analyse evidence collected through sources such as research, personal social experiences and reading. In everyday language events, meaning is indirectly communicated and learners need to move their thinking and writing from what is given to other conclusions. We infer constantly as, usually, a piece of evidence is open to various inferences or interpretation.

Concept formation is the process of integrating information so as to classify issues into meaningful categories; it is an ability to move from the concrete to abstract theoretical levels. It enables a person to interact with non-contextualised situations. Cummins’ (1979) distinction between language for basic interpersonal communication (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) has relevance here. CALP, according to Cummins (ibid), is the level of language proficiency needed for context-reduced, cognitively demanding work of concept formulation in literacy. This distinction indicates a certain status both in social background and in information manipulation for discourse creation.

Epistemic cognition, the understanding and ability to interact with non-fictional content and texts, is more familiarly known as ‘critical thinking’ and is an integral part of AL. Cognitive psychology focuses on mental processes such as memory, reasoning, information processing, language, problem-solving, decision-making, analysis and meaning-making. Cognition involves acquiring knowledge using elements like our thoughts, ideas, convictions, experiences and environment, to satisfy tertiary discourse requirements (Weiten 2001).

Learning in tertiary institutions exposes students to new ways of values, beliefs and cognitive practices which all culminate in a certain type of communication or discourse. For ‘traditional’ students the necessary background would have been provided by their high school education and with some orientation students will make the necessary adjustments. For underprepared students the required background may not exist, and even though lectures may, in their instruction, imply the appropriate discourse structure for tertiary studies some students fail to demonstrate ‘essayist literacy’ required by the different disciplines and processes of higher education (Lea & Street, 1998). A fair indicator of tertiary-literate individuals is not only their ability to demonstrate expertise in certain specialised areas of knowledge but also a flexibility or certain command of linguistic norms to discourse appropriately in various linguistic events.

Discussion and Recommendations

Attempts to revise ECS really do not involve major conceptual changes but rather, I believe, involves the implementation of the aims of the course. As discussed earlier, the conceptual framework of ECS is quite similar to those underpinning other support initiatives like those at the University of Pretoria, University of Limpopo, University of Stellenbosch, as well as placement tests like, the Standardized Assessment Tests for Access and Placement (SATAP), Placement Test in English for Educational Purposes (PTEEP), Admissions and Placement Assessment Programme (APAP) and the National Benchmarking Test (NBT).
One attempt to design a relevant ECS can be supported by a yearly needs assessment of first-entering students through the use of the various placement tests available nationally and the results of which are then incorporated into an individualised constantly-amended ECS. Tests like SATAP and NBT assess the tertiary-readiness of Grade 12 students in academic literacy, quantitative literacy and Mathematics, in addition to the national examinations. One of the strengths of this assessment is linked closely to its standards which are objective and achievable, in line with identified principles of teaching and learning and academic literacy, as well as its ability to distinguish, quite comprehensively and fairly, between achievers and non-achievers.

The need for the benchmark / placement tests arose from some assumptions and conditions which surround the nationally-written Grade 12 examinations. Over the years Higher Institutions (HIs) have realised that the provincial influence on Grade 12 results have meant that some school-leaving results are not a true reflection of the performance or potential of tertiary-entering students, hence the need to develop additional forms of assessment, in order to accurately and fairly select and place students. This problem is further complicated by the newness of the pre-tertiary school curricula over the last few years. The current school's curricula have not yet been benchmarked against international standards and it therefore, seems logical to introduce this additional layer of assessing to get a more comprehensive picture of students’ readiness for tertiary, until the curricula have stabilised.

Univen, as a matter of policy, does not require in-coming students to take any placement tests. Of course, Univen has an institutional mission and vision which are used to justify this stand, however the placement tests can also be used as curriculum modifies. Results from in-coming students taking these tests then can be used yearly to individualise ECS. Such a process should not be mammoth task because of the multipurpose aim of most support activities, hence an activity for the critical development of ideas can also be evaluated, for example, for technical correctness, analysing and interpreting texts, distinguishing between main and supporting evidence and research skills. The NBT readily comes to one’s mind but such an assessment is not limited to that, hence Univen can also design its own tests focusing either exclusively on generic language skills or a broader-based one on general academic literacy with the inclusion of optional discipline-specific sections. The ECS curriculum then may be reviewed by the ECS lecturer, as well as those from discipline-specific departments in response to the test results. It can also be argued that should content-specific lectures be satisfied with the content and the relevance of ECS, when the modules should be taken can next be discussed. For a support course to be taken by non-first year students would mean a redefining of the term ‘support’ or for ECS to expand its mandate which should answer some of the concerns about relevancy.

Some kind of initial assessments can also be exploited for more cohesive groupings within ECS. Now the groups within ECS are dictated by the timetable resulting in an un-homogenous mix of students for half of the course. The 1994 change in the South African education scene has seen the presence of more diversity among students, both linguistically and potentially. This offers its own type of challenges; therefore similarities in issues to be dealt with in a similarly-abled class should, surely, ensure some relevancy in ECS teaching and learning. It is necessary that the NBT should be seen in its dual role, entrance/placement and curriculum design indicator. Most non-participating institutions in the NBT cite, as some of their reasons, the need to be socially responsive to the socio-economic background of their human environment and confidence in the integrity of the Grade 12 results.

Most former-disadvantaged universities tend to have these common, core support courses or ECS-like courses, to which students are directed either based on their Grade 12 results or some initial screening once they enter the university. Institutions’ degree credit patterns accommodate this. This is cited as one of the reasons why core modules, like ECS, must remain in a degree package. An amendment to this would be exempting a certain calibre of students from ECS - type linguistic support and offering them related alternatives / electives such as, academic reading, essay writing, vocabulary development, creative writing and public speaking. Substituting language-related electives for ECS would maintain the credit patterns in degree structures; in addition, positive consequences for ECS would include fewer students taking the course and therefore more favourable student-lecturer ratios and high motivation levels for those taking ECS and those taking the alternate language-related courses. The introduction of language-related electives can also be exploited by content lecturers who might want to refer students to the wider range of support courses on offer in the English Department.

The ECS curriculum is not the only aspect which can be reviewed but also the strategies in offering the modules. As noted above, the lecturer-student ratio is high and hence some assisted teaching can be beneficial. Discourse development in Univen, like in other similar universities, relies on the traditional approach of face-to-face interaction with the facilitator in a lecture hall. While it can be argued that this type of pedagogy has its place in the scheme of things, it is never-the-less labour and resource intensive, not individual-specific and extremely time-bound.

What is being suggested here is similar to a language enhancement strategy which was piloted by the SANTED-Univen Computer-Assisted Language project. This project introduced computers as one of the teaching strategies or ‘blended’ teaching (Gilliver-Brown and Johnston, 2009)’ multimodal, (Leech, & Candlin, 1986; Van Schalkwyk, 2008) to discourse instruction (Kaburise, 2013). Computer-assisted language learning, (CALL) is a generic term for interactive language learning strategies using various technological equipment located in a sophisticated, learner-centred laboratory. Within such a laboratory one would find video and audio tape libraries and equipment, computer-assisted language learning software, graded workbooks and sheets, all within a fully interactive laboratory (Levy, 1997; Jones, 2001). Cazden, Cope, Fairclough and Gee (1996) in their far-impacted work on multi-literacies, describe a fundamental shift in the understanding of literacy, how it is acquired and its impact on discourse. This has included not only moving away from a print-material definition of competence but also incorporating print, visual and multimedia abilities.
The SANTED-Univen Language Project was a pilot project designed to improve selected students’ handling of aspects of English academic literacy through the use of an educational software, **MySkillslab**. MySkillslab is an interactive computer-assisted programme and consists of a series of activities for students to work through individually-designed work plans based on the results of a diagnostic test. The focus of the reading section of MySkillslab enhances reading skills and critical interaction with texts. The objectives of the project were divided into long and short term. In the long term it was hoped that the project would improve the throughput rate of students at Univen and enhance students’ academic literacy; and in the short term, to improve students’ English reading literacy, critical thinking and handling of academic discourse.

Three hundred and five (305) students wrote a pre-test in June - July 2009 and 300 wrote a post-test in December 2009. The achievement can be seen with a ‘before’ and ‘after’ profile of the 300 students. Below is a summary of students’ performance:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competences</th>
<th>Pre-test taken by 305 students</th>
<th>Post-test: 300 students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No: of students who showed mastery</td>
<td>No: of students who showed mastery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>201 (66%)</td>
<td>240 (80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical development</td>
<td>137 (45%)</td>
<td>198 (66%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying main idea, essential and non-essential facts</td>
<td>113 (37%)</td>
<td>180 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequencing of ideas</td>
<td>122 (40%)</td>
<td>225 (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing and following arguments</td>
<td>162 (53%)</td>
<td>210 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first set of figures shows the numbers of and percentages of students who passed the five concepts. The total shows that 48% of the students could handle the tasks in the pre-test. After exposure to MySkillslab the number of students who showed mastery of the various tasks had increased to 70%. An improvement of 22% after only six months’ exposure is most encouraging. What this would mean for ECS is that the reading activities can be strengthened and made relevant by MySkillslab and thus the introduction of similar programmes should see some improvement in students’ discourse creation.

Lack of resources, both physical and human has also prevented the inclusion of tutorials and mentoring as additional teaching and learning strategies in ECS. One does not need to belabour the educational benefits of tutoring and mentoring. Fortunately, a Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning (CHETL), with a mandate to initiate various forms of support to staff and students, was established in 2010 in Univen. Within this mandate CHETL has started the identification and training of post-graduate students who can function in these support areas. Each department has been asked to identify post graduate students who will then be trained for these roles. It is hoped that once the exercise is over, ECS would be able to support students further with tutorials and mentoring.

In addition, staff training in teaching / lecturing methods as well as training in academic development has been undertaken by the Centre. This is particularly relevant for lecturers with no teaching experience as sometimes a blend of teaching and lecturing is the most appropriate strategy for a module or course. Offering academic support with the varying student abilities in mind is not an easy task and most lecturers see their role as only imparting degree-specific knowledge using a lecturing mode. Sometimes this approach is not the most appropriate in terms of the discipline content or the profile of students. This training would directly benefit the ECS course as its lecturers would adopt the more appropriate teaching-lecturing approach in the instruction of the course. Indirectly, CHETL’s intervention should raise awareness among lecturers of linguistic support and the concept of academic literacy. Linguistic and literacy development, is not an incidental outcome of exposure to course content but needs to be instructed in and therefore with such awareness both ECS and content lecturers can become academic development practitioners.

**CONCLUSION**

The aims of ECS, as listed in the earlier sections of this paper, were conceptualised along recognised academic literacy and discourse construction tenets but the profile of both students and the Univen has narrowed its implementation options and this is the main source of the course’s unspectacular outcomes. The changing socio-economic profile means that Univen can boast more diversity in its student profile to include students from better socio-economic backgrounds. This should reduce the number of students needing ECS. In other words, this should mean the de-categorising of ECS as a core module. This, plus incorporating the results of some initial needs-assessment through the nationally – endorsed placement tests should see ECS as a relevant and hence, high-impact module. Better lecturer-student ratio would also see the challenge, of lecturers aiming for the ‘middle ground’ because of the obvious different discourse-creation abilities of the students taking ECS, minimised. Tutorials and mentoring can all be introduced with manageable student numbers. A policy change in
Univen, necessitating all literacy and discourse-enhancement modules to be taken in the first year, would ensure that better-skilled students go on to the subsequent years of their degree courses.

Inability to transfer discrete isolated skills learnt in ECS to discourse in situations like essays, oral classroom presentations and writing of research reports, was one of the concerns raised against ECS. Instruction in discrete language codes, although discredited as neither fostering flexible strategic levels of language interaction, or cognitive academic language and discourse proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1979), should not be totally ignored in curriculum design for students with certain levels of discourse creation ability. It is so important for learners not to compartmentalise skills but to see their final product as an amalgamation of discreet language skills. An excellent academic piece of writing for example, will be a combination of grammar, semantic, pragmatic, cognitive, inferential, reading and writing skills; in fact the list is endless. The skills need to be taught in isolation first, then combined. What is being proposed for ECS, therefore, is an eclectic approach within a broader base for discourse competence, which blends organisational, pragmatic and strategic competences within the new literacies framework.

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Panel members’ experience of peer evaluation of teaching practice

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ABSTRACT
This paper describes the added value experienced by panel members who participated as assessors in a teaching awards process of a South African university. The concerned university recognises excellence in teaching in Higher Education (HE) through the Institutional Teaching Excellence Award (ITEA). This award is annually presented to lecturers who provide proof of teaching excellence through participation in a process of rigorous criteria-based assessment. One of these processes requires peer evaluation of their teaching practice. Staff from Academic Support Services, discipline specialists and a Faculty Teaching Committee member constitutes the panel of peer reviewers. One of the criteria for panel selection is previous participation in the ITEA process. The peer evaluation process of a participant’s teaching practice is often daunting for both the participant and colleagues on the panel. Although the process of panel review is time consuming, panel members receive no compensation for their time and effort. Yet research indicates that the benefits of the peer evaluation experience for all involved seem to outweigh the "costs". In this study, individual interviews were conducted with ITEA panel members in order to determine their personal experiences of peer evaluation during the ITEA process, and to identify the added value of the process in relation to their own development. Results indicate that the peer review experience positively influenced the teaching practice and general academic work of the panel members themselves. It is therefore evident that whilst the ITEA process is aimed at the assessment of teaching practice, it also provides additional opportunities for professional development of participating peer evaluators. These results can serve as basis for motivating further recruitment of panel members to participate in the ITEA peer review process, thereby enhancing the quality of teaching at the University.

INTRODUCTION
Why do academics expose themselves to peer evaluation? Peer evaluation of research outputs is an accepted practice for determining research quality. According to Kohut, Burnap and Yon (2007, 19) many academics believe that it is far easier to evaluate the quality of research than that of teaching because of the established public forum, the external validation associated with research and the accepted existing peer review process. On the other hand, teaching is perceived as a very personal, highly complex and ever evolving process involving a multitude of different skills and techniques (Galbraith and Merrill 2012, 58) and requiring a flexible, cogent system of evaluation (Kohut, Burnap and Yon 2007, 24). Peer evaluation of research articles is a structured, anonymous process guided by strict established criteria and blind review. In contrast, peer evaluation of teaching practice leaves the one being evaluated in a very exposed position through a process of open review. It requires that the panel of peer reviewers become involved in a more personal manner via direct observation, critical evaluation and intrusive commenting on the practices employed by lecturers in their classrooms. Mento and Giampetro-Meyer (2000, 30) are of the opinion that this may be an uncomfortable situation for both the participants and the panel members.

The participation of panel members in the ITEA peer review process is voluntary; a time-consuming additional work load without financial reward. In light of these facts, this study aimed to determine the value that panel members gained from participation in such a process. In addition, during the study of related literature certain concerns were identified with regards to the process of peer evaluation of teaching quality.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The expanding use of peers in the evaluation of teaching quality is part of a larger trend in postsecondary education towards a more systematic assessment of classroom performance (Yon, Burnap and Kohut 2002, 104). The rationale for this approach to teaching evaluation has grown from theoretical contributions on the scholarly nature of teaching (Boyer in Quinlan 2002, 1046) and teachers' knowledge (Shulman in Quinlan 2002, 1046). Shulman (2011, 2) is of the opinion that teaching will never achieve anything near parity with research until it is subjected to the same type of peer review, that is, until it becomes community property "just like our research". Peer evaluation of teaching usually involves academic peers who assess a lecturer's performance through classroom observation as well as the careful examination of instructional materials and course design. Classroom observation is aimed at evaluating the choice of teaching strategies and learning opportunities, its alignment to the nature of the set outcomes for the contact session, and the resultant student learning. The focus is generally on verbal and non-verbal behaviours of both the instructor and the students in the classroom (Kohut, Burnap and Yon 2007, 20).

Summative approaches to peer-evaluation of teaching practices place primary emphasis on providing judgmental and comparative information to the academic staff member about the status of his/her teaching practice, as well as for the purpose of institutional and program accountability, policy and decision-making. Formative approaches to peer-evaluation of teaching practices place emphasis on providing periodic feedback to academic staff members for the purpose of assisting with developmental increments and improvements in teaching (Brawley 2008, 3). Panel members can thus have two contrasting roles, one of reviewer who provides distant scholarly feedback according to specific criteria in order to provide evidence for decision making, and the other of mentor where regular feedback is provided and academic staff members are assisted with the engagement in scholarly approaches to teaching (Hubbal and Clark 2011). For purposes of the Institutional Teaching Excellence Award (ITEA) at our university, panel members engage in criteria based peer evaluation and provide scholarly feedback, and also act as internal mentors by providing feedback, guidance and advice to improve and develop teaching. The receipt of an ITEA award signifies that a lecturer has reached the status of excellent university teacher. This is in line with the purpose of the ITEA where lecturers need to provide evidence-based demonstrations of how their teaching practices adhere optimally to healthy outcomes-based teaching principles that will promote effective learning in the HE environment. In addition, the ITEA process also encourages full-time academic staff to develop their teaching skills as it provides opportunities to improve their teaching practice under the guidance of experienced academic advisors and peers in the same field of study.

The ITEA process entails peer evaluation, student feedback and the evaluation of a comprehensive teaching portfolio. Peer evaluation entails the observation and evaluation of three contact sessions, two unannounced and one announced. The peer evaluation panel consists of one academic development advisor, a teaching committee member and a colleague who is a subject specialist and who has previously successfully participated in ITEA. As stated previously, panel membership is voluntary and time consuming and devoid of obvious rewards. Furthermore, because this peer evaluation process is a very personal experience, it may be uncomfortable to "criticize" the work of a colleague (Mento and Giampetro-Meyer, 2000:29). Therefore the study was undertaken to determine the motivation behind panel participation. This paper also reports on the panel members' experiences of identified critique from literature on the process of peer evaluation of teaching performance.

RESEARCH METHODS

A qualitative research approach was followed by conducting semi-structured interviews with lecturers from different faculties who acted as qualified panel members during the annual ITEA process. Six lecturers (5 male and 1 female) from the faculties of Arts, Engineering and Commerce were interviewed during the time available for completion of the study. Concerns identified from the literature regarding the peer evaluation process formed the main framework for the interview schedule. The interview questions focused on the reasons for panel participation, their experiences of the evaluation process, the impact of their participation on their own teaching-learning approach, and how their personal teaching experience and philosophy influenced the evaluation of their peers. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcribed data was sent to the participants for member checking. The data was analysed following a process of coding after which the coded text was divided into units. Thereafter each unit was labelled and then grouped into themes (Creswell and Clark, 2011:208). The interview questions and the literature review were used as guidelines in identifying the themes. Ethical clearance for the project was received from the University Ethics Committee.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings that emerged from the analysis of the lecturers' responses to the interview questions are presented according to the identified themes.

Reason for participating as a panel member

The responses to the first question as to the reason why lecturers participated as panel members indicate a sense of commitment to teaching and quality. The panel members indicated that teaching was important to them and that it was a way of contributing to the process of enhancing teaching quality. None of the panel members referred to the possible advantage of participation for promotion purposes.

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This is in line with the findings of Kohut, Burnap and Yon (2007, 24) when they state that some academic staff members believe that the evaluation process may take inordinate amounts of time yet such efforts do not get noticed or rewarded. The following responses support these findings:

“You have to give something back. This is totally voluntary, but this is like really important for teaching.” (Wally)

Yon, Burnap and Kohut (2002, 104) suggest that informed and well-trained peers are ideally suited to evaluate their colleagues, especially colleagues in the same field. The panel members were all lecturers in the same discipline or field as the participants. They had all previously successfully participated in the ITEA process, thus bringing to the panel not only subject expertise, but also experience of peer evaluation.

“Yes, I think to be in the same faculty helps, you need to know at least something of the subject. So it will not help to put me on a panel for Chemistry, it will not make any sense to me. But like in the same faculty you know enough to see, oh yes, this guy should have thought of this application or something like that.” (Wally)

Context in terms of attitude and atmosphere

Mento and Giampetro-Meyer (2000, 28) raise concerns about the context in which peer evaluation takes place. They mention that the spirit and attitude surrounding peer evaluation may influence the process and its results negatively. Low levels of trust among academic staff members may make lecturers reluctant to take part in peer observation and evaluation, but as Kohut, Burnap and Yon (2007,24) state, colleagues who trust and respect each other can be valuable in helping improve each other’s teaching. It was clear from the interviews that the panel members experienced the process of peer evaluation in a positive light. Professionalism, trust and ethical behaviour were evident in all the faculties.

“We have a very unique sense of unity in our faculty, a high level of professionalism. People do not see the peer evaluation process as a personal vendetta, so we have never had problems that a participant comes to you after the evaluation and takes you on.” (Mark)

“There is collegiality in the process. The people with whom I have to work, we are in a good collegial context. I think it is important for a candidate to be able to feel it is not somebody coming in from the side. You want to have someone on the panel that you can trust because you want to feel safe within the process. I think that safeness is a nurturing type of situation.” (Stef)

Content and criteria of evaluation

A second concern that Mento and Giampetro-Meyer (2000,28) raise concerning peer evaluation of teaching is that most professors (participants) wonder about the content of the evaluation. They want to know what their peers will be observing. As the panel observes their teaching, what questions will they ask themselves? Therefore, criteria and standards that define effective classroom instruction should be established against which to review teaching (Quinlan 2002,1036; Yon, Burnap and Kohut 2002, 109).

During the ITEA process, a structured evaluation form with specific criteria is made available to both the panel members and the participants. Definitions and explanation of terms and concepts are also included, providing guidance to all involved as to the meaning of the criteria. The evaluation form that includes the criteria is regularly revised to make sure that it stays relevant to the constantly changing world of HE teaching and learning. There is opportunity for narrative feedback so that the panel member can elaborate on the marks allocated, or make suggestions for improvement. A narrative instrument captures the actual events in the classroom as they unfold without pre-existing assumptions about what should occur (Yon, Burnap & Kohut, 2002:109).

“The form is meaningful, but you need to add more than just the marks. I write a lot of comments on the form.” (Wally)

“It was nice to have all the descriptions of the criteria and the explanations of all the concepts. (Gilbert)

“You have a good framework from which you can work. This is a rubric that is very clear, I can understand how to work with it.” (Jordan)

Yon, Burnap and Kohut (2002, 109) advise that the peer observation instrument should also allow for more than a single paradigm of instruction and not be overly culturally dependent. The instrument, therefore, should not penalize academic staff who uses different instructional modalities. Academic staff members select teaching paradigms, based on philosophy, teaching style, content or skills to
be taught, ability to use alternate instructional strategies, and student learning styles. Peer observation instruments that do not allow for variations in instructional strategies may produce less than favourable results. The ITEA panel members did not experience the evaluation form as restricting since the criteria are developed in a way that allows for different paradigms of instruction.

“The form is good, but it must be used for more than one contact session, as your teaching differs from one contact session to the other, depending on what you do. That form will fit perfectly for teaching over time and not for a once off session.” (Mark)

Feedback

During peer evaluation, panel members may feel uncomfortable to give feedback to colleagues. Mento and Giampetro-Meyer (2000, 29) advise that feedback should be open and honest. The panel members in this study perceive feedback as a crucial step in the process of teaching improvement. Some of them preferred feedback in the form of discussions directly after the contact sessions, while others preferred written feedback to participants compiled by the panel coordinator from all the completed evaluation forms. Kohut, Burnap and Yon (2007, 23) noted in their study that participants in the peer evaluation process found it easier to communicate comments in writing because it appears to be less direct and less challenging.

“It is easier to just quickly explain to the lecturer what we meant with our comments, even though he will receive the formal feedback from the co-ordinator. On the other hand, it is sometimes better to wait a bit and reflect on what you have written during the evaluation, and then to change your comments, especially if the lecturer used another approach that you were not comfortable with, but that did actually work.” (Gilbert)

“This is what makes the ITEA process so good, people need to think about what they are doing and then these guys come (the panel) and give you feedback. You are constantly exposed to feedback and better quality. It is a very interesting and positive thing; I am not scared to evaluate people. The panel is in general very friendly and open minded, even when I was a participant myself. It is a learning opportunity, always a development opportunity.” (Wally)

“A lot of people regard it as a very scary evaluation process, but then they experience it as a very positive thing. If you give negative feedback, you need to provide suggestions on how to improve.” (Stef)

Influence of own teaching philosophy and paradigm

Hubal and Clarke (2011, 4) cautioned that peer evaluators must be sensitive to their own agendas and frames of reference (i.e. their understanding of the institutional and teaching contexts, their personal beliefs and values about effective teaching, and their evaluative skills), as well as those that are held by the academic staff member being reviewed. Quinlan (2002, 1041) explains that the most common strategy that academics employ during peer evaluation is measuring the participants’ practices against their own practice or experience. Generally, if the practice is similar to that which the evaluator him/herself will employ, the participant receives a positive evaluation. Should the participant’s practice not align with that of an evaluator, a reluctant or negative evaluation can often be expected. It may be difficult for peer evaluators to acknowledge a practice or teaching goal different from their own, and still judge that approach as effective in its contribution to student learning.

The results from the interviews indicate that the panel members are aware that there is not one “right way” to teach in the HE environment, as Mento and Giampetro-Meyer (2000, 31) confirm. During the evaluations, panel members relied strongly on the criteria stated in the evaluation form for guidance, but they also took into account that each lecturer, as well as their contexts and disciplines, are unique and require different teaching approaches and strategies. They did, however, reflect on how they themselves would have approached a particular teaching situation, but according to them, such reflections did not influence their evaluations negatively.

“You know, everyone is unique. So I try and see what the lecturer does and not so much as to how I would have done it. That is what I try.”

“I think the whole time, ok, this is how the other persons (previous participants) would have done it and how I would do it and how this guy is doing it and where does it fit in. It does have an influence, but the fact that you have good guidelines according to which you can evaluate helps to limit your own influence.”

“It is important to admit if I am not hundred present comfortable with everything that happens in the class, it is not hundred present how I would have done it, but how did the students react? Are the students growing, can I see that happen? Did learning take place? That is an important benchmark.”

“No, no, I am not uncomfortable if a lecturer follows a different paradigm. It is interesting to see how he does things differently. But I do think it can have an influence if you feel very strongly about a paradigm and here somebody is doing something different.”
One of the panel members admitted that she supports the development of self-directed learning very strongly, and that her ideas on that influenced the evaluation of her colleagues’ teaching practices:

“I definitely expect that there should be self-directed learning. So it did influence me, and active participation and learner centred was important for me. So this has influenced everything and how I looked at it.”

Bi-directional learning

A significant by-product of a peer evaluation process is the bi-directional learning. Mento and Giampetro-Meyer (2000, 31) found in their study of peer observation of teaching practice that panel members themselves experienced the evaluation process as developmental and extremely valuable. The evaluators indicated that they learned as much from the process as the person being observed. The panel members participating in this study also indicated that bi-directional learning is a significant and valuable result of the peer evaluation process. They felt that the process of observation, evaluation and critical feedback contributed towards their personal and professional development and this was a topic that surfaced continually during the interviews. The process encouraged panel members to self-reflect on their own teaching practice.

“There is always something new that you can take, you can evaluate it and think will it work for me, yes or no, how can I change it to work in my class. So there are definitely things that you can apply in your own classes.”

“You cannot be critical and tell the lecturer to do something different in their class and then you go back to your own class and you realise you are doing the same thing wrong. So in that context you do not have a choice but to continuously reflect on what you yourself are doing as a lecturer. You cannot but reflect on yourself. Even in the process of talking to the participant, you hear things that take you further in the learning process.”

“You see what they do right and wrong and you absolutely learn from it because some of the things that they do wrong, when you think about it, you also do it and you must stop it. I learned more from being a panel member where I had to evaluate somebody, than from being a participant (previously). Because if you are a participant, you only reflect on your own teaching, there is not any comparison. If you evaluate somebody else, then you cannot but help to reflect on your own practice.”

CONCLUSION

In this study, the experiences of a group of panel members who participated in a peer evaluation process for a teaching excellence award (ITEA) were investigated. The ITEA has a very strong developmental ethos through professional peer evaluation. During the process participating lecturers are not only evaluated, but also receive support and feedback for improvement of teaching practices within a professional environment of trust and mutual respect. Peer evaluation of teaching practice is an important process of quality measurement in the HE teaching environment. Acting as an ITEA panel member, however, is a time-consuming, daunting and sometimes uncomfortable task, especially since it is an intrusive, personal and open process. The benefits for the peer evaluation panel members are not always obvious. From the study it is evident that panel members did not participate in the peer evaluation process for recognition, but because they are passionate about the quality of teaching and learning and want to contribute towards the enhancement thereof.

The findings show that there is a high level of professionalism and an emphasis on ethical behaviour amongst colleagues in all the participating faculties. Panel members confirmed that there was respect and trust amongst colleagues and ITEA participants were always afforded the opportunity to develop their teaching practices in a safe and supportive environment. Furthermore, panel members experienced the evaluation form with clear and valid evaluation criteria as helpful during the evaluation process, as it provided both a structure for evaluation and opportunity for narrative comments that was important for constructive feedback. They also observed that the evaluation form did not restrict the panel members or participants to a specific teaching paradigm.

A significant positive aspect of the ITEA process experienced by panel members was the feedback provided to participants. Feedback was provided either verbally directly after contact sessions or in written form. The panel members explained that the ITEA process was not only a judgemental process, but a development and learning process where feedback plays an important role.

Peer evaluators need to be sensitive to their own philosophies towards teaching and learning and how these may influence their evaluation of their peers’ practices. In this study, panel members were well aware of the biases towards own teaching paradigms, and although they tended to compare what the participants did to what they would had done, they were of the opinion that this did not influence their evaluations negatively. Panel members indicated their open-mindedness during evaluation and found it interesting to see different teaching approaches in practice.

From the study it is evident that the most important and valuable contribution of panel participation in the ITEA process is the bi-directional learning that occurs. All the panel members were adamant that being an evaluator forced them to critically reflect on their own teaching
practice. They did not only observe aspects of teaching that may have raised concerns, but recognised strategies and ideas that they themselves might in future implement in their own teaching practice.

The findings from this study indicate that peer evaluation panel members experienced participation in the ITEA process as positive and valuable for their own professional development. This concurs with Brawley’s (2008) observation about the importance of such activities:

“If university teachers see the evaluation of their teaching as simply being about some bureaucratic notion of quality control rather than a tool for continual improvement of their practice, then the game is lost before it has begun.”

**Recommendation for further research**

The sample for this study was small due to availability of panel members for interviews in a limited time frame. The study should be expanded to include more panel members, as well as participants in the ITEA process, to compare their experiences of the process.

The ITEA process is a voluntary process. It may be that panel members are inherently more drawn to issues of teaching and learning and thus more positive towards this process. This may be an area for further research.

**REFERENCES**


Reading and Writing in the Writing Centre: an integrative approach

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Abstract

Many universities provide support for reading in academic literacies courses; however, these interventions do not always reach all of the students who could benefit from such assistance. Although reading and writing are complimentary processes, issues related to reading are not traditionally addressed in writing centres. The aim of this study was to explore the feasibility of offering an integrative approach to reading and writing assistance in a writing centre. To gather information on student needs related to reading which surface in one-on-one writing consultations, an electronic questionnaire containing open-ended questions was designed and distributed to writing consultants. Not unexpectedly, responses revealed that many students visiting the Writing Centre require assistance with various aspects of reading. There were also indications that this is having an adverse effect on writing. Provision of additional training to consultants in reading development strategies could lead to a more holistic approach to meeting student’s academic literacy needs and, by extension, ultimately assist the Writing Centre to better meet its overall objective of improved student writing.

Keywords: reading development, reading comprehension, integration of reading and writing, writing centres, higher education

Introduction

Increasing numbers of students entering higher education today are underprepared for the rigours of academic study. In the United States, only one third of high school graduates are considered ready for college, and these numbers are even higher for poor and minority students (Wagner 2012). In South Africa, due to the inequalities of the past and an educational system deemed to be inadequate, many students, if not a majority, struggle to succeed in higher education. This issue often manifests itself in the areas of reading and writing. Although numerous institutions of higher learning provide support for reading in academic literacies courses and assistance with writing at writing centres, such interventions alone may be insufficient to sustain long-term learning goals related to literacy, particularly in the area of reading. Problems with literacy emerge early and, if not adequately addressed, become worse over time (Rose and Hart 2008). A 2006 study on the reading literacy levels of Grade 4 and 5 students in 45 countries around the world revealed that South Africa was placed last (PIRLS). Results of the 2011 Annual National Assessments conducted on nine million pupils across the country in Grades 2-10 confirm these findings (Mtshali 2012). In terms of reading comprehension, only 21% of Grade 3’s and 49% of Grade 4’s demonstrated competence. On “thinking and reasoning” just 12 % of Grade 4’s and 11% of Grade 5’s could satisfactorily answer questions on what they had read and give reasons for their answers. These results suggest that the majority of children in South Africa do not meet even the lowest standards when it comes to reading. Commenting on these findings, Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga noted that, “Many of our learners lack proper foundations in (these subjects) and so they struggle to progress in the system and into post-schooling education and training” (Mtshali 2012). These findings are cause for concern and have implications for higher education in South Africa and elsewhere.

Reading at university is much more challenging than reading at school. Students are expected to engage in a variety of complex learning activities involving reading, expectations an increasing number of students are unable to meet. Recent statistics from a South African university (Clarence-Fincham and De Kadt 2011) indicate that only 13.3% of students admitted in 2011 achieved the score required on the academic proficiency component of the National Benchmark Test to perform at the desired level without academic support. Many of these students have attended disadvantaged or under-resourced schools and come from an oral cultural tradition rather than a reading one. If one takes into account that a significant number may also be learning in a second, third or fourth language, it is not surprising that large numbers struggle to succeed.

Research shows a strong correlation between reading proficiency and academic success (Alexander 1997; Nunes1999; Townend and Turner 2000) and, therefore, “a focus on writing at the expense of reading is misplaced” (Rose and Hart 2008, 1). Reading is the “primary” skill, and if those skills have not been adequately developed at school, there is a need for them to be integrated into subject content and taught explicitly at university (Rose and Hart 2008, 1). Many lecturers, however, for a variety of reasons (which will be discussed later in this article), have expressed reluctance to take on this role, the result being that the literacy needs of many students are not being adequately catered for.
The purpose of this article is to discuss the bringing together of reading and writing in a writing centre, an environment which traditionally focuses mainly on writing. By providing supplemental training to writing consultants in reading development strategies, student needs related to reading which are not currently being met could be addressed while at the same time, because of the close connection between reading and writing, help the Writing Centre to better meet its overall objective of improved student writing.

This study is informed by research on reading in higher education and theories of metacognition, self-regulated learning and writing centre pedagogy. In the following section, further background information on the higher education context referred to in the article will be provided as well as an overview of relevant literature on reading in higher education, metacognition, self-regulated learning and writing centre pedagogy. This will be followed by a description of how the study was conducted and a discussion of the results and implications for reading development and writing centre practice.

**Theoretical framework**

When university lecturers are asked about the reading competence of their students, the typical response is that students do not understand what they read and do not engage in outside reading (Horning 2007). There are several factors that could account for this: lack of instruction, lack of practice and lack of a felt need to engage in reading. Whatever the cause, by the time students enter university, many have not developed the critical reading skills necessary for reading extended, academic texts with understanding (Torgeson et al. 2001; Nel et al. 2004; Nel and Nel 2009; Horning 2007; Bean 2011; Bharuthram 2012).

It is often assumed that once learners acquire decoding skills, they will automatically develop reading comprehension skills. Researchers have found, however, that this is not the case; more formal instruction is required (Gough and Hillinger 1980; Wren 2002). Not all children find it easy to make the transition from decoding to reading with understanding, yet in many schools there is little explicit instruction to promote the development of more advanced reading skills (Spinges 1993). In South Africa both the Revised National Curriculum Statement and in-service training programmes reveal that little, if any, attention is paid to the development of teacher competency in this regard (Klapwijk 2012). As a result, many students become focused or “stuck” on decoding (Chall 1983; Devine 1988; Pretorius 2001; Torgeson et al. 2001).

Furthermore, if reading comprehension skills have not been adequately developed in the mother tongue, it will be difficult to apply them in a second language (Pretorius 2000). This issue is particularly noteworthy in the South African context where only a small minority of students have English as a first language (less than 10%) while the majority are second, third or fourth language English speakers (Lemmer 1996; Probyn 2001). Despite this, and no doubt related to the South African historical context, most children are educated in English (Lathy 2006). In the words of Seligman and Gravett (2010, 110), “Without assistance, many of them cannot make the difficult but necessary border crossings between languages.” Therefore, because of continuing problems with fluency, language, word recognition and decoding, the whole reading process slows down, preventing students from focusing on the deeper meaning of texts (Torgeson et al. 2001).

Although most students have achieved basic literacy by the time they enter university, many are still unable to comprehend the academic texts they read. Students at this level need to be taught to read “powerfully” and to become deep readers as opposed to surface ones (Bean 2011, 161). Deep readers think critically about text and search for connections with what they already know while surface readers, in contrast, focus on the reproduction of facts and information. Top-down models of reading also emphasise the importance of prior learning in the reading process and suggest that meaning is derived not from print itself but through engagement with text and activation of prior knowledge (Goodman, 1983; Smith, 1994).

Metacognition appears to be a key factor in this process. The term was first coined by Flavell (1971) and refers to thinking about thinking. It involves being aware of one’s own “cognitive state” and having “the ability to make appropriate adjustments to performance when needed” (Huff and Nietfeld 2009,162). Metacognition is important for higher order thinking and learning in a university context, and research has shown that learners with strong metacognitive skills are more successful (Ertekr and Newby 1998). The use of metacognitive strategies, if sufficiently developed, will also deepen reading comprehension (Boulware-Gooden et al. 2007). For example, when reading for understanding, successful students are able to effectively analyse text, discern text structure, identify logical flow of ideas and the relationships between them and utilise “comprehension monitoring and revision” techniques (Ku and Ho 2010, 253). If metacognitive skills are underdeveloped, students will not recognise when reading comprehension has broken down and be unable to put measures in place to rectify the situation, thus failing to monitor and self-regulate their own learning.

The notion of self-regulated learning refers to students who can apply strategies such as these in a conscious way in order to accomplish academic tasks (Schunk and Zimmerman 2008). Self-regulated learners are capable of and motivated to set learning goals, choose appropriate strategies to achieve them and then critically assess the quality of the outcomes to learn from their mistakes and improve future performance (Deci 1992; Kistner et al. 2010).

Self-regulated learning links with many aspects of writing centre practice. In the majority of writing centres in South Africa and internationally, students are helped to find solutions to their own writing problems and to identify and correct their own mistakes (Brooks 2001, 206-218). Opportunities are provided for students to work one-on-one with peers who have been trained to listen, offer feedback and make
suggestions which enable students to find solutions and work through ideas on their own (Kelly 1995, 11-25). Higher order and global issues are addressed before attention is turned to sentence level concerns. Writing centres do not see themselves as remedial spaces where students can be sent for correction or fixing (North 2001, 63-68). As such, student work is not edited or proofread because this does not teach transferable skills. Rather, the overall aim is to create a writer-friendly, peer-learning environment, where student writers are not judged, punished or marked but supported as they develop a variety of writing skills. Peer collaboration is the underpinning philosophy - student led development as opposed to consultant led instruction (Barnett and Blumner 2001).

The conversations that take place during one-on-one consultations between readers (writing consultants) and writers help to establish an enabling environment in which students are supported to develop their own writing and critical thinking skills. Introducing students to a repertoire of reading strategies for use before, during and after reading in the context of the student’s own reading and writing could also assist them to more effectively monitor their own learning (Tei and Stewart 1985) and become better readers and writers over time.

Equally significant is the influence of reading proficiency on writing ability. “The absence of reading has a direct impact on students’ writing” (Horning 2007, 9). In Horning’s view, reading forms the basis of academic writing across the curriculum, and the two must be taught in tandem. Widespread reading gives readers an opportunity not only to improve reading skills but also to internalise aspects of effective writing practice across the spectrum potentially leading to improvement in their own writing (Squire 1983; Zamel 1992). A frequently cited longitudinal study conducted by Stotsky (1983, 636) indicates that “better writers tend to be better readers, better writers tend to read more than poorer writers and that better readers tend to produce more syntactically mature writing than poorer readers.” Moreover, reading frequently serves as a starting point or incentive for writing projects, and if students are not exposed to the reading and writing practices of their own disciplines and discourse communities, they will be unable to compose such texts themselves when called upon to do so (Squire 1983; Horning 2007; Beaufort 2007; Bean 2011).

Given that many students entering university today have not acquired the critical reading and writing literacies deemed essential for success, there is a need for these skills and strategies to be taught explicitly (Bharuthram 2012). In her view, institutions of higher learning must assume responsibility for ensuring that all students are provided with opportunities to acquire the requisite competencies. In the United States, for example, most universities require incoming students to enrol in generic writing composition courses in order to introduce them to general principles of academic writing. Research has demonstrated, however, that stand alone academic literacies and skills courses are not very effective because transfer does not generally occur, and most students are unable to apply these skills in their other subjects (Perkins1992; Wingate 2006).

Embedding or integrating academic literacies into the discipline where they become an integral component of the subject taught by the disciplinary expert has been shown to be beneficial to students (Biggs 2003; Johns1997; Perkins1992). Internationally, writing intensive courses, writing across the curriculum and writing in the discipline programmes have been successful in this regard by enlisting the cooperation of academic members of staff to assist with writing development and by helping students acquire and practice the main features of academic writing in the context of their own disciplines. The dilemma for South Africa and many other developing countries is that such initiatives, while laudable, may simply not be possible to implement given the context of large class instruction which is the norm. Moreover, many academics feel that it is not their responsibility to teach reading and writing given the pressure to get through subject content, citing excessive workloads, large student numbers and time constraints as obstacles (Franke 2002; Jacobs 1981; Seligman and Gravett 2010; Bharuthram 2012). Others indicate that they do not possess the expertise to do so. By offering reading assistance in addition to the existing support for writing already being provided, writing centres could step in to fill this gap and, potentially, play a pivotal role in supporting and facilitating literacy development in one-on-one consultations with students.

**Methodology**

An exploratory study was conducted to gain an indication of the feasibility of an integrative approach to reading and writing assistance in the writing centre. Writing consultants were requested to share their individual experiences while consulting. To gather information on student needs related to reading which surface in one-on-one consultations and that influence writing, an electronic questionnaire was designed containing five open-ended questions (See Figure 1). Data obtained from the questionnaire was analysed using qualitative content analysis following a deductive approach (Yang and Wildermuth 2009). A deductive approach is useful when the aim is to test a theoretical issue in a new context (Elo and Kyngas 2007). In this case the issue is the close relationship between reading and writing.

Based on literature related to student problems with reading and writing in higher education, the following information was sought: types of reading problems typically experienced; frequency and repetition of various reading problems; and the effect on students when an integrated approach to reading and writing in a writing centre is used. A final question was posed to establish the need for training of consultants in reading development theory and strategies.

The target group consisted of 16 writing consultants employed at the University of Johannesburg Writing Centre on its Auckland Park campus in 2012. All of the consultants were postgraduate students, representing a variety of disciplines. One was working on her Ph. D, 12
were working on their Masters and three were working on their Honours degrees. Each was selected for the position on the basis of his/her writing and interpersonal skills as well as on his/her performance during a rigorous interview process in which a piece of writing had to be analysed from the perspective of a writing consultant. All consultants went through an initial three day orientation session at the beginning of the academic year focusing on, among other things, writing centre pedagogy and facilitation strategies. Weekly meeting/training sessions followed. Of the total, six were returning for a second or, in some instances, third year. The remainder were first-time writing consultants. All work between five and ten hours per week, with the more experienced consultants working longer. Typical consultations are thirty minutes in length while postgraduate consultations generally last for one hour.

It is acknowledged that this is a small study, but it was conducted to provide useful information for a larger study at a later stage.

Results and discussion

Of the 16 questionnaires distributed, 15 were returned. For reporting purposes, in the results and discussion section consultants are referred to as Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), Participant 3 (P3) and so forth.

In terms of the nature of reading problems observed by writing consultants in the Writing Centre, lack of reading comprehension was cited as an issue by all respondents with the exception of one. This particular consultant is subject-specific and sponsored by her department although based in the Writing Centre. She attributed her students’ lack of difficulty with comprehension to the excellent preparation for the assignment provided by the lecturer, corroborating the importance of the role of the discipline expert in promoting the development of academic literacies (Wingate 2006; Rose and Hart; Bharuthram 2012). Meanwhile, comments made by other consultants tell a different story:

The biggest problem I think students experience relates to the problem of comprehension. Students think they have no problem when it comes to reading because they can read the words, but they do not understand what they are reading and they do not even realise that they do not understand what they are reading (P1).

The main problem is that some students do not fully comprehend what they are reading and do not see the importance of doing so (P3).

Not only do these two comments draw attention to the challenges that arise when students engage in surface reading as opposed to deep reading (Bean 2011), they also point to factors within the affective domain related to motivation which also have an impact on student learning (Deci 1992). Furthermore, these comments illustrate a lack of knowledge on the part of many students pertaining to what academic reading entails. Academic reading requires active engagement with the text, and the reader must search for connections with what is already known. If this does not occur during the reading process, comprehension breaks down and meaning-making is unlikely to occur (Goodman 1983; Smith 1994).

Several other factors relating to comprehension were also cited, namely failure to understand assignment instructions, an inability to make meaning from text, an inability to understand key concepts and misinterpretation of what has been read.

Two consultants referred specifically to students’ lack of understanding of assignment instructions:

They experience problems understanding the instructions, probably due to not reading the questions slowly and properly (P9).

The students have a problem understanding the instructions for what they’re supposed to do (P13).

These remarks corroborate what consultants frequently relate during staff meetings; a significant amount of time during consultations is devoted to unpacking assignment instructions and clearing up misconceptions about what it is that students are expected to do. The struggle to make meaning from text is another challenge for students:

I find that many students struggle to create meaning from academic writing. This is especially true for longer or more complex sentences since they are still struggling with the meaning of many individual words and are unable to group words within a sentence as part of the greater meaning or context (P14).

Frequently, students believe that they have understood what they have read only to discover later that they have not. This could indicate a need for further development of skills relating to self-regulated learning and metacognition (Ertmer and Newby 1996; Boulware-Goode et al. 2007; Schunk and Zimmerman 2008; Huff and Nietfeld 2009; Ku and Ho, 2010), particularly those related to reading; for example, the ability to determine when comprehension has failed and what measures need to be put in place to remedy the situation.
Furthermore, if students arrive at university without having adequately made the transition from decoding to comprehension and from learning to read to reading to learn (Chall 1983; Tei and Stewart 1985; Devine 1988; Pretorius 2000), they will continue to be, out of necessity, fixated on decoding, thus preventing them from focusing on meaning-making instead. If they are second language English speakers as well, this will only compound the problem (Pretorius 2000; Probyn 2001; Lathy 2006; Seligmann and Gravett 2010). It suggests that such students will not only be unable to adequately understand but also, possibly, misinterpret the key concepts they are being asked to demonstrate knowledge of in writing assignments.

Students seem to misunderstand their reading material… (P8)

Some students have difficulty following complex discussions (P6).

This problem appears clearly during consultations with students who struggle to understand the topic… (P12)

Also, students who are unable to understand what they read frequently experience difficulty paraphrasing, summarising and incorporating the views of others into their own writing.

The students experience extensive problems with reading for understanding and exhibit an inability to summarise and paraphrase salient information, which in turn compounds issues concerning critical engagement and expression (P11).

Students have stated repeatedly that they find it difficult to critically decipher information from academic sources and to relate this information to their own written work (P4).

These factors, along with the volume of reading required and a lack of practice in how to read academic texts effectively (Tei and Stewart 1985; Horning 2007; Bean 2012), lead some students to give up altogether and simply “memorise tracks of script that they do not understand” (P2), which often leads to plagiarism, what one consultant contends is “the biggest problem” (P13) of all and which Horning (2007) refers to as essentially a reading problem rather than one of academic dishonesty. When asked to paraphrase or summarise, some students struggle because in all likelihood they have not been taught how to unpack or deconstruct an academic text. They do not know how to identify and extract key points or how to differentiate main ideas from nonessential ones:

Extracting the relevant facts from a piece of writing is challenging for them…not everything is relevant…They place everything they read on the same level of importance instead of sifting the important bits from the rest (P2).

Equally important is a lack of awareness of reading strategies. Many students do not receive instruction in how to read texts purposefully and critically. As a consequence, they tend to read everything the same way (Chall 1983; Pretorius 2000; Horning 2007; Bean 2012):

Students are not always aware of or able to apply different reading strategies. They often read an academic text in the same way they would read a magazine or book for enjoyment (P5).

They assume that academic reading is similar to other kinds of recreational reading and, in approaching it in that way, they fail to extract the necessary information from their reading (P15).

Given that reading and writing are closely related activities (Stotsky 1983; Squire 1983; Zamel 1992; Horning 2007; Bean 2012), it is not surprising, then, that the majority of consultants observed that reading problems manifest themselves frequently in the Writing Centre.

These problems affect a large number of students. Generally, most students have some kind of difficulty with reading academic texts. These problems affect students at all levels of university, not just first year students (P5).

Most of the students I see have these (reading) problems. I think it is so widespread because (the) younger generation in general do not read (or enjoy reading) anymore (P15).

So far, all of the students I have seen have experience similar problems (P13).

If I had to give a figure, I would say 40% of students that I have consulted with are experiencing these problems (P12).

As such, most consultants were of the opinion that the Writing Centre could be an effective context in which to address issues related to both reading and writing and that, by doing so, improvement in student writing could occur:

Writing consultations could certainly be an effective platform for these concerns, as the consultation inevitably includes reading aspects (P4).
Effective writing requires a good knowledge of academic material which requires good reading skills in order to understand. Offering students assistance with reading skills can enhance their writing skills (P6).

I believe that the students’ writing could remain the focus of the consultation, but there is much to be gained from some attention on reading….I feel that many students don’t write well or focus simply because they don’t fully understand the question….The one-on-one consultation offers the ideal situation since it provides the individual attention necessary for the student and uses the context of their current studies to drive their reading and writing in the session. Even if the writing consultation afforded time for only a few minutes on academic reading strategies, I believe it would have a tremendous effect on students’ writing (P14).

Being able to properly read, interpret and analyse your assignment question and the content of your prescribed text contributes to the quality of your writing…Reading academic texts also serves as good examples of what academic writing should look like. The more students read the more they will start to incorporate and mirror those writing techniques (P15).

What I think could be effective is (making) students aware of how their reading skills affect their writing skills and…encouraging them to return for assistance with reading (P5).

If nothing else, the consultants seem to be saying, raising awareness of the reading and writing connection can only stand to benefit student writers. Of those few consultants who did disagree, the reason(s) given revolved around time.

The reading and writing consultations should be separate as 30 minutes could be less time than required to address both issues (P3).

It is difficult for a consultant to address reading and writing concerns during the short duration of a session. However, a one-on-one writing consultation is an ideal situation for making students aware of their poor reading skills (P12).

With regard to incorporating training in reading theory and the development of reading strategies into writing consultant training, all 16 of the consultants strongly supported the idea.

...It is absolutely imperative that training in the development of reading skills/reading strategies be included in writing consultant training. This will enable the consultant to be equipped with the necessary skills and strategies to adopt a holistic approach in dealing with the reading and writing challenges of students (P10).

Yes. It was, unfortunately, neglected in my Education degree courses and, as a remedial teacher and writing consultant, I feel it would be very helpful (P11).

I think the present training programme that focuses just on the development of writing skills and writing strategies is deficient…because the reading challenges experienced by students impacts negatively on their writing proficiency (P10).

It will raise consultants’ skill levels and help them to handle the challenges facing students who enter the Centre holistically. It may not even be the case that reading skills and strategies are overtly discussed…but the tutor would still be better equipped to guide students in their learning. Not only is the Writing Centre an effective context (for dealing with reading issues), I believe the services it offers to be indispensable to the success of the majority of students at university and indeed the aims and expectations of the university itself. Nowhere else is the individual attention, training and support that is necessary for their success to be achieved than through one-on-one consultations...(P14)

Responses of writing consultants indicate that problems related to reading, and reading comprehension in particular, coupled with a lack of knowledge of reading strategies frequently manifest themselves in writing centre consultations. Additional training in reading development theory could enable consultants to meet both reading and writing needs of students and in a more effective and holistic fashion.

Conclusion

Due to increasing numbers, diversity of student population and an educational system that has by many accounts failed to adequately prepare students for university level study, growing numbers of first year students need assistance to acquire, or further develop, the academic reading and writing competencies required for success. For a variety of reasons (lack of resources, large class size, reluctance of academic staff to take on what many view as an additional role) these needs are not being adequately met. The aim of this study was to explore the feasibility of an integrative approach to reading and writing assistance in the Writing Centre. Feedback compiled from writing consultant questionnaire responses suggests that this approach might afford an ideal opportunity to do so in the form of one-on-one...
consultations where both issues could be addressed simultaneously. Tracking of students availing themselves of this service could provide further insight into the viability of this approach.

Findings revealed that the majority of students visiting the Writing Centre for writing assistance also exhibit problems related to reading, and reading comprehension in particular. Consultants made specific mention of the failure of students to understand assignment instructions, to make meaning of text and to understand key concepts. They observed that a lack of awareness of reading strategies is also widespread. Students do not read with a specific purpose in mind – everything is read in the same way – and they do not critically engage with texts. This inability to deconstruct academic texts also hinders the ability to paraphrase, summarise and synthesise which in turn leads to problems with plagiarism.

Training of writing consultants in reading development strategies in addition to writing pedagogy and facilitation strategies was supported by all of the participants in the study. Consultants are already dealing with issues related to reading in the Writing Centre, if only in an ad hoc manner. Explicit training pertaining to reading literacy could equip them to better meet the needs of students by adopting a more holistic approach to reading and writing development while at the same time continuing to support, and potentially advance, the overarching aim of the Writing Centre which is improved student writing and enhanced academic performance.

References


**Writing Centre Consultant Reading Questionnaire**

1. What kinds of problems with reading, if any, do the students you consult with experience?
2. How widespread are these problems?
3. In your view, could the one-on-one writing consultation be an effective context in which to also address reading concerns? Why/ why not?
4. In your opinion, could such assistance lead to improved writing? Please elaborate.
5. Should training in the development of reading skills/ reading strategies be included in writing consultant training? Why/ why not?
Recontextualization of professional discourses in academic writing: A case of police postgraduate students

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Abstract

Postgraduate academic literacy is gaining ground as an area of research and teaching in South African Higher Education. Not many studies have been conducted on postgraduate MTech policing students accessing academic discourse in an Open Distance Learning (ODL) context. This study employs critical discourse analysis with ethnographic framing to explore and describe the writing practices of police postgraduate students. I describe the writing based practices and values in the police professional context, and how these discourse practices get recontextualized in academic writing in the MTech research proposals. Data for the research comes from an intertextual analysis of (one) students’ writing, semi-structured interviews with the student and the departmental guidelines for writing the research proposal. In the analysis of students’ writing, findings point to tensions and discourse clashes when police attempt to access academic discourse. There is a mismatch between actual student writing practices and expectations from the supervisor. The student’s writing is an instantiation of the intersection between professional literacies, academic literacies, and workplace literacies. This analysis reveals the complex nature of a proposal and characterizes academic discourse in the policing discipline, and how writing instruction can begin to be conceptualized in ODL.

Key words: postgraduate academic writing, modality, recontextualization, intertextuality, literacy as a social practice, discourse

This research began when my colleagues and I, working as tutors in undergraduate reading and writing, initiated an intervention at the postgraduate level at the University of South Africa (UNISA) between the years 2005 and 2007. I was responsible for assisting Policing postgraduate students with academic literacy doing a masters programme under one of the old Technikon South Africa degrees, the Magister Technologae (MTech). The enrolment in the MTech program consists of students who are long-serving members of the South African Police Services (SAPS). The majority of the learners are ‘mature’. They have worked as professionals in different SAPS units, such as client service centers, detective branches and victim empowerment units. The motivation for enrolling for a policing degree is usually to obtain promotion to a senior rank.

The MTech degree requires students to first complete a proposal before writing a dissertation. At UNISA, like in other South African universities, postgraduate students have to write a proposal during their first year of registration within the first 6 to 12 months. Postgraduate students (students studying higher degrees beyond the first degree in South Africa) are struggling to complete their MTech proposal through UNISA. They face challenges with academic reading and writing, and the proposal genre. McKenna (2004) in the South African context, has argued that identity plays a role in the manner in which students adopt academic literacy. She argues that when individuals take on a literacy, such as an academic literacy or workplace literacy, they are investing in the identity constructed by that literacy and that such investment changes over time and space depending on conditions of power and compatibility between the target literacy practices and the individual’s current multiple identities (McKenna 2004, 273). On the other hand, Boughey (2002,) criticizes labels such as English as an Additional Language (EAL) as inadequate to describe student problems. She situates her work within the New Literacy Studies, specifically writing as a social practice, and argues for ‘epistemological access to the process of knowledge construction.’ To illustrate this, Boughey (2008, 194) describes how students draw on other contexts which may be ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ in the context of the university when writing.

Research on academic writing has described tensions when postgraduate students write proposals for Masters and Doctoral studies, (e.g Allison, 2003). According to Allison (2003, 156), ‘a rather special and relatively succinct instance of student research writings is the case of the higher degree research proposal…the proposal forms an important element in the eventual selection of doctoral research students, and hence future members of specialists academic research communities.’ Not many studies have been conducted on the challenges and difficulties experienced by postgraduate students when writing the proposal. Leibowitz (2004) reports on the experiences of both undergraduate and postgraduate University of the Western Cape students in their efforts to become academically literate. She argues that students’ literacy backgrounds inform their academic writing and that attention should be given to factors such as race, geography and gender.
Very few studies have been conducted in South Africa on literacy amongst the police. For example, Arend (2005) compares the literacy practices (including the writing of statements) within some police stations in the Western Cape. Some studies have tended to focus on the basic 6 months training that the police undergo upon joining SAPS and the transformation of the police as a result of democratic changes in South Africa, e.g. (Rauch, 1992). Not many studies focus on the police accessing a university education. Adlam (1999) describes the outcomes of an attempt to provide a management development experience for police managers which took as part of its goal the genesis of reflective practitioners. The author says that academics were not able to develop a ‘critical’ reflective practitioner, meaning the ability to reflect on ones experience in accordance with what has been learnt at a university. The author outlines the evidence for the failure and then suggests an explanation which draws from knowledge of the social interactions which generate the police occupational cultural milieu (in other words, professional discourses), and observes that the police culture is at odds with academic culture. In this paper, I explore students’ challenges with academic writing using a theoretical approach of literacy as a social practice, drawing from New Literacy Studies (NLS), a tradition that views student writing as an institutional, epistemological and identity matter, rather than debates about good and bad writing, (e.g. Lea and Street, 2006). They provide three models to conceptualize approaches to writing in academic contexts. These models are study skills, academic socialization, and the academic literacies model. For the purpose of this paper, I will explain the third model.

According to Lea and Street (2006, 369), academic literacies is concerned with meaning making, identity, power, and authority. It also involves both epistemological issues and social processes, including power relations among people, institutions and social identities. There has been a widespread use of the academic literacies model in the United Kingdom, the US, and South Africa, among others. This paper draws on new literacy studies and investigates the writing (discourse) practices of postgraduate students. Pennycook (1994, 128) argues that ‘discourse does not refer to language…but to ways of organizing meaning that are often, though not exclusively, realized through language’. Ivanic (1998, 37) claims that the term ‘discourse’ is good because it foregrounds the concern with social issues in the study of language. On the other hand, she argues that ‘an advantage of using the word ‘language’ is that it foregrounds the linguistic aspects of discourse, which can become obscured by the broader scope of the term ‘discourse’’ (ibid). My interest in discourse has made me to focus on knowledge, values, beliefs, and social practices around the MTech degree. Although I use a linguistic lenses, it is a view of literacy as a social practice. When police write the proposal, there is an indication that they experience difficulties with general features of academic writing, for example, how to structure the proposal, academic English, the use of sources, and so on. Johns (1997, 64) says that if students want to become affiliated with academic discourse communities, they may have to make considerable sacrifices, ‘they often must drop, or at least diminish in importance, their affiliations to their home cultures in order to take on the values, language, and genres of their disciplinary culture.’ The notion of discourse communities is key in the apprenticeship and membership of academic discourse community (Swales, 1990), particularly postgraduate students.

The research questions and method

This paper is part of my PhD research which uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with ethnographic framing and is situated within the New Literacies Studies.

The following questions will only be partially answered in this paper:

1. How do professional and academic discourse practices amongst MTech Policing graduate students intersect in the proposal?

Sub-questions

1. What are the writing based practices in the police professional context?
2. How do these discourse practices get recontextualised in academic writing in the MTech proposals?

In the following discussion, I will use a linguistic analysis to describe how the professional and academic discourses intersect in the proposal. The discussion and analysis will be through the use of three linguistic concepts. These are modality, intertextuality and recontextualization (these concepts will be explained below). In the main study, I interviewed the students about their writing practices, challenges with academic writing, and I also framed a ‘talk around the proposal text’. I will provide an excerpt of this interview. I have opted to focus on one student by the name of Sipho. Sipho is a black male in his early fifties. He is a senior officer in Alice, a small town situated in the Eastern Cape. He is the overseer of three sections. Sipho speaks English as a first additional language and his home language is IsiXhosa. He became a police official in 1991. He registered in 2007 for the MTech, and completed it in 2011.

A theoretical perspective on academic writing

As part of the investigation of the context, I combine aspects of ethnography with Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The main view of language and context from SFL is that ‘the texts we say or write are determined by the exact configuration of characteristics in the actual social context’ (Clark and Ivanic, 1997: 65). In SFL context is divided into the context of situation and context of culture. According to Boughey (2005, 231), the context of situation refers to the immediate environment in which a spoken or written text is produced and determines the choices available to language users within three areas: what is being spoken or written about (the field of a text); the relationship between
the language users in that situation (the tenor of a text) and the role language plays in this interaction between language users (the mode of a text). The choices that are made in the context depend on wider sociocultural factors, in other words the context of culture. Ivanic and Clark (1997, 71) claims that what the writer brings to the task in terms of attitudes, beliefs, and the purposes that lie behind the setting of that particular task are connected with the context of culture. In other words, writers draw from the context of culture when producing texts. Recontextualization is associated with the work of Bernstein (1996) who was interested in curriculum and the sociology of knowledge, however, in this study, I apply a linguistic orientation of the concept, which is informed by Wodak and Fairclough (2010), and Gunilla (2006). Wodak and Fairclough (2010, 22) argues that ‘spatial and temporal relationships between texts include relations of recontextualization whereby texts (and the discourses and genres which they deploy) move between spatially and temporarily different contexts, and are subject to transformations whose nature depends upon relationships between such contexts.’

Two themes that illustrate the tensions between discourses at the intersection of the three contexts (university, workplace and profession) are: research and knowledge in order to provide justice or service delivery, and the tension between workplace (operational) concepts and academic discourse. Each one of these will be discussed below.

1. Research and knowledge in order to provide justice or service delivery

Sipho’s research topic is on the evaluation of the handling of domestic violence cases. The first tension is that in my analysis of Sipho’s MTech proposal, it seems that he has a perception that the aim of research is to offer solutions to policing problems, rather than to uncover and build understanding of problems. His use of linguistic devices, such as, modals or modality leads to the inference that research is to provide service delivery.

Modality

In the literature on systemic functional linguistic (SFL), Eggins (2004, 178) argues that modality is used to describe the degree of certainty or of usuality in a proposition, ‘when modality is used to argue about the probability or frequency of propositions, it is referred to as modalization, when modality is used to argue about the obligation or inclination of proposals, it is referred to as modulation.’ Hyland (1994) claims that academic writing is rich in hedged propositions, by allowing writers to express their uncertainty concerning the factuality of their statements or to indicate deference to their readers, epistemic devices are a significant characteristic of academic writing.

For example, in concluding the section on ‘background and rationale for the research’, the student promises to achieve justice by undertaking this MTech degree;

Extract from ‘the background and rationale for the research’ proposal:

It is also an intension of this study to provide justice to domestic violence victims i.e. at police station and at the courts. (Sipho’s proposal, page 2)

What interests me is how the student expects to address the justice issue by enrolling for an MTech degree. Perhaps the student could have expressed this more tentatively, such as, ‘the study may contribute to justice’, thereby conforming to the ‘modality’ of how one in academic proposals writes about his or her contribution. This also appears to be a conflation of one’s duties as a professional with one’s postgraduate studies and shows the predominance of the policing discourses of service delivery over the academic discourse at this point. The primary duty of the police is to investigate crimes and then gather evidence that can be used for prosecution and possible conviction, perhaps that is why he links the research aim with providing justice. In terms of SFL, Sipho is drawing on the police professional culture that does not demonstrate an academic understanding of what research is about.

I then interviewed him about the tension between academic knowledge and workplace knowledge. Sipho gives specific gaps in the Domestic Violence Act involving various institutions below:

Sipho’s reflections on his proposal:

Researcher: you did say in your proposal writing that one intention of this study is to provide justice to domestic violence victims at police stations, and at the courts. So do you think that has been provided, now that you have finished your research?

Sipho: In the police stations and courts, yes. You see, we are experiencing problems in court, in the justice system, in respect of this domestic violence. You see, one of the questions for my research was the training of the police officer. But now I notice that even those who are working at court are not trained in domestic violence, most of them are not trained. You see, those who are doing the domestic violence in the courts are these clerk of the courts and those things, they do not know, they do not understand the Domestic Violence Act. And there is nothing that says, if they do not comply with it, there will be a penalty or what, like in policing. You see, we as police officials
are always focusing on domestic violence because if I have not complied with the Domestic Violence Act, it means I can be chased away from the service. So there is nothing from them, even from the clinics or the hospital. You see, a domestic violence victim have to get priority, but it’s not practical in our hospitals. (Sipho’s interview, page 12)

Poor training has been blamed as a major weakness in the handling of domestic violence related cases, particularly cases where women are the victims of domestic abuse. Sipho indicates that domestic violence involves different stakeholders from the courts, police stations and hospitals. While the police context of culture has compliance rules where the act is concerned, other institutions do not have these. For example, Sipho alludes to the rules and discipline that are enforced by the police service; such as, ‘if I have not complied with the Domestic Violence Act, it means I can be chased away from the service.’ This invokes the service delivery discourse. Sipho is able to identify the multifaceted nature of domestic violence, but this may not address the problem but it uncovers the root causes of the problem and it is in line with knowledge as a reflection on practice, in other words Mode 2 (Gibbons, 1994). The police are expected to comply with the act and where they do not, there are penalties, even to the point of dismissal from the service. This is part of the professional culture of the police that requires the members to be disciplined and to observe the rules, (Adlam, 1999, 2002). This reflection above further proves the influence of the professional culture on his academic writing.

I continue to explore and describe the tension between workplace (operational) concepts and academic discourse below using intertextuality and recontextualization.

2. Tensions between workplace (operational) concepts and academic discourse

Both intertextuality and recontextualization (defined below) can be used to analyse the interface between professional and academic discourse. Fairclough (1992) argues that ‘in addition to incorporating or otherwise responding to other texts, the intertextuality of the text can be seen as incorporating the potentially complex relationships it has with the conventions (genres, discourses, styles, and activity types), which are structured together to constitute an order of discourse.’ Fairclough explains that the dimensions of intertextuality which are important in building up a framework of discourse analysis are; manifest intertextuality, interdiscursivity, textual ‘transformations’, and how texts constitute social identities. Fairclough (1992, 117-118) distinguishes between manifest intertextuality and interdiscursivity. He states that ‘manifest intertextuality is the case where specific other texts are overtly drawn upon within a text, whereas interdiscursivity is a matter of how the discourse type is constituted through the combination of elements of orders of discourse’ (Fairclough 1992, 117-118). The following is an example of interdiscursivity.

The section in the students’ proposal is entitled, ‘key theoretical concepts’. The three theoretical concepts defined under the student’s title are ‘cluster’, ‘domestic violence’, and ‘domestic relationship’. These appear to be concepts borrowed from the workplace and the student does not indicate how they are relevant to the study. The excerpt on the concept of cluster is reproduced as an illustration:

**Intercursivity**

*Extract from the proposal:*

**Cluster**

According to English Oxford Dictionary (Hemby 1985) a cluster is a number of persons, animals, objects, etc in a small, close group. This study will focus on four stations that are grouped together under an accounting station which is Alice hence the ‘Alice cluster’. The four stations are Middledrift, Fort Beaufort, Keiskammahoek and Alice and they are geographically close to each other and the advantage is that they can easily come together and jointly fight crime. (page 3, Sipho’s proposal)

Cluster above is a policing geographic demarcation concept, rather than a key theoretical concept. This term is widely used by the police for the purposes of grouping police stations. Sipho refers to a definition from the English Oxford Dictionary. He then gives the context which he is alluding to as the ‘Alice Cluster’. It is not clear how it will become a ‘key theoretical (research) concept’ which is relevant to the proposed study. An interesting thing is that Sipho is defining his terms yet definition of terms sits within very specific orientations to research. If Sipho is doing an interpretative study, then the genre is inappropriate. Secondly, when reading this section one would have expected to see something to do with paradigms, abstract ideas, or the theory versus practice division’ as this heading of the research proposal might suggest in social scientific academic discourse. Therefore, the context of the use of ‘cluster’ raises tensions with the theoretical framing of the research proposal.

**Recontextualization**

Linnell defines recontextualization as ‘the dynamic transfer and transformation of something from one discourse/text-in-context to another’ (quoted in, Gunilla, 2006). Gunilla (2006, 674) asserts that, ‘aspects that can be transformed between contexts range from linguistic expressions, like wording, phrases and propositions, to more abstract or larger entities, like stories, arguments, knowledge, values and
ideologies or ways of saying things.’ When writing the aims of the study the student uses the verb ‘investigate’ which is a suitable term for a research enquiry (see extract below). However, the term is used repeatedly when for instance other terms like ‘evaluation’, ‘impact’, and ‘satisfaction’ could have enhanced the nature of this research:

Extract from proposal:

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

It seems as if members of the community of the Alice cluster are not properly served or not served at all when they come to report domestic violence cases. The researcher intends to investigate this problem of poor attendance of domestic violence cases or non-attendance. It is also the duty of the researcher to investigate if member of the South African Police Service who are already in the field do get in-service training by means of work shops or courses and trainees who are at the college do get enough information and training on domestic violence. The aim of this research study is to investigate whether members of the SAPS who are already serving members of the community in the Alice cluster and have sufficient knowledge of the Domestic Violence Act and whether the quality of their services illustrate the importance of the Act. The constitution of the Republic of South Africa stipulates that everybody have the right to be treated with dignity and respect. The researcher will also investigate if registers and forms needed to record domestic violence incidence and cases are available at the community service centre.

These forms include 508(a), form 1, form 2, certified copies of warrants and SAPS508 (b) (domestic violence register).

These registers and forms can help the community service centre personnel to maintain good service delivery to members of the community. The researcher will investigate if there is privacy when dealing with domestic violence victims because every Police Station is supposed to have a victim’s room or friendly facility where victims of domestic violence are attended. The researcher will also investigate if important contact numbers that could be helpful to the victims e.g. district surgeons, clinics etc. (Sipho’s proposal, page 5)

Overuse of the word ‘investigate’ in the proposal may be because the word is central to police investigative discourse and investigation of crime. It thus expresses an overlap, and potential tension between the professional and academic discourse settings. This terminology gets recontextualized in the aims of the proposal. It signifies the investigative nature of policing. Besides the investigative discourse type being recontextualized in the proposal, the student may have limited vocabulary as an English as a Second Language speaker. However, what is of interest is that this discourse type dominates and gives less ability to other terms that could have represented the variety of academic discourse. The term ‘investigate’ is another workplace terminology, and a policing technique of conducting operational duties. Investigation of crime is a major performance of the police. The student is borrowing from the workplace and applying it wholesale into the academic context. There is a misfit when these terms are recontextualized in the proposal. This is seen in the mismatch found in some of the guidelines from Tutorial Letter 101.

Both the intertextuality of the term ‘cluster’ as a key theoretical concept and the recontextualization of terminology like ‘investigate’ represent the sense-making practices or the imitation of these elements of discourse to make meaning in a new context. However, this may be insufficient as a theoretical concept that is required by some supervisors and the guidelines that are made in Tutorial Letter 101.

Departmental Guidelines for writing the proposal

This tutorial letter explains what the supervisor expects from the Key Theoretical Concepts. There appears to be a mismatch between students writing and the expectations from the supervisors, and my interpretation of the guidelines that the students were given. For example, Tutorial Letter 101 states the following below about the Key Theoretical Concept:

Extract from Tutorial Letter 101:

6 KEY THEORETICAL CONCEPTS/CONSTRUCTS OF THE STUDY

The problem statement contains a number of concepts that should be defined clearly. You have to provide accurate and unambiguous definitions of the most important concepts and ensure that these concepts are used consistently throughout the research dissertation.

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1 Tutorial Letter 101 is a document that is given to every UNISA student outlining the aims and objectives of a program or qualification, the syllabus, and administrative information.
The definition of key concepts is necessary to identify related research and to place the current research project within a conceptual and theoretical context. It involves two steps:

- a conceptual or theoretical definition
- an operational definition

The conceptual or theoretical definition should be derived from the literature. An operational definition assigns meaning by specifying what must be measured or assessed or how it should be measured or assessed. In this case, it is also important to substantiate all facts and to acknowledge all sources consulted. (page 36, of Tut Letter 101)

According to the guidelines that the students have been given above, the key theoretical concepts should be drawn from the literature. Interestingly in Sipho’s proposal, they come at the beginning of the proposal, when the student has not written his literature review and he does not see the connection between these KTC and the literature review, let alone the relevance of the terms to the research dissertation, because he is still grappling with the proposal at this stage. This guideline could be problematic in that students maybe struggling to write the definition of terms at the beginning of the proposal, as it is done in a positivist research philosophy, as opposed to integrating these terms in the exploration of the literature as it is common in an interpretative paradigm.

Conclusion

There are two dominant discourses from the workplace in this proposal. These are the justice or service delivery discourse and the investigative discourse. At the moment it appears that policing is a hybrid discourse of the legal system, the public service, and the investigative discourse. These discourses are more dominant than the academic discourse that the student is demonstrating when he writes the proposal. The academic context also adds other challenges with Open Distance Learning because the student only relies on printed material when writing the proposal. Furthermore, he does not experience a sense of belonging or membership of the academic discourse community since he is far removed from the supervisor. Evidence from this research suggests that students may recontextualize these discourses and therefore there is a discourse clash at the level of what the student writes, and what is expected by the supervisor and what I have discovered through my analysis of the writing, and the reality within the discipline (e.g. students, academics and tuition). It seems that more research on the discipline and its literacies, e.g Jacobs (2005), could further shed some light on these writing practices.

Students use the Open Distance Learning study guides as part of the mediation when constructing their own texts. Students may not transform the text, therefore imitation (and no proper recontextualization). The academic discourse community for the Mtech is complex and indeed the academic discourse community for ODL students who never leave the workplace. Therefore, there is a need of theorizing academic literacy in the ODL context, something which I hope to contribute to, in the rest of my PhD research.

References


Research-Based Learning: How ‘Real World’ Issues Matter to Academic Capability

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Abstract

Studying at German universities has changed fundamentally in recent years. Mostly, the learning activities were no longer based on research but focused on restricted workloads and achievements (credit points). Concerning this situation and supported by Joachim Herz Stiftung we are carrying out a project for research-based learning in the field of economics and management sciences that aims at imparting the basics of doing research work to students, combining elements of research work with students’ individual learning activities, and linking aspects of different disciplines, by which students systematically experience and understand how scientists and experts think and work. Through these scholarly activities students shall gain basic knowledge of research principles and mechanisms, plan and realise research projects in their fundamentals, contribute to their individual development, learning success and academic capability, apply scientifically generated knowledge on ‘real world’ contexts, learn how to work self-determined, how to take over responsibility for findings received by working in groups, and how to guide research-based learning of their fellow students. Therefore, four structural elements composing a cycle of several scholarly activities are established: (1) a marketplace where science meets practice; (2) a workshop where scientific investigations are founded and prepared; (3) a laboratory where the investigation is carried out; (4) a studio where the results of the investigations are presented, reflected and exploited. The article stresses the idea and examples of research-based learning as well as didactical principles for arranging such learning and teaching.

1. Introduction and Background

Research-Based Learning (RBL) shifts scientific work into the focus of higher education. It is meant to link research with teaching and learning by involving students in scientific investigations of ‘real world’ issues (Elton 2001; Healey 2005; Huber 2009). Therefore, the concept was recently discussed as an effective approach towards enhancing the quality of higher education (see Euler 2005; Huber 2009; Wildt 2011). Especially in Germany RBL is becoming increasingly important due to the impacts of the Bologna-Reform-Process (introduction of bachelor and master degrees).

The principles of studying at German universities have changed fundamentally. Before the reform-process, higher education (in a Humboldt sense) strived for participating students in research, enabling them to estimate various scientific approaches and outcomes in the field of research, and encouraging them to apply scientific findings on practical issues and questions to be answered. In contrast, being a university student today often means to learn like a pupil in school acquiring and reproducing mainly short-term (unsustainable) knowledge. Mostly, the learning activities are not based on research but focused on restricted workloads and achievements (credit points). Hence, students’ participation in academic discussion and debates within a protected and unbiased atmosphere is more or less a marginalised phenomenon. Even genuine forms of academic talk and debate are of secondary importance due to the ‘test score culture’. Consequently, German university education is going to lose its specific scholarly qualities by which it stands out from other institutions of higher education (colleges, institutions of applied sciences).

It is an undeniable requirement that students have to gain scholarly techniques, attitudes and inclinations for learning and thinking. Such capabilities need to be acquired in university undergraduate courses as well as during graduate studies for which basic academic capabilities are necessary preconditions. Schneider and Wildt (2009, 54) assume that RBL contributes at least to the students’ academic capability and their individual development. Furthermore, they suppose RBL to support the scientific progress.

However, there are only few empirically proved approaches towards the guidance of students’ research-based learning processes (Hellmer 2009; Kazura and Tuttle 2010). These gaps in higher education and possible approaches to solving them are the focus of a project which we are carrying out in the field of economics and management sciences. The project is supported by Joachim Herz Stiftung and it is accompanied by an evaluation regarding the following questions:
• How can RBL be arranged within undergraduate and graduate studies in order to improve teaching and learning, and in particular to counteract the current tendency turning university courses into school instruction?
• Which effects could be achieved by students, especially regarding the acceptance of higher education, students’ motivation and their learning success?
• To what extent can students contribute to the progress of a scientific field by working together with researchers on real research questions?

Below, some results from the first project period are summarised. They include a conceptual framework for RBL, didactical principles and a curricular approach.

2. Conceptual Framework for Research-Based Learning
The project follows a concept which is based on Bruner’s discovery learning theory (Bruner 2006, 57-66) and which is closely related to the ideas of work-integrated learning in South African higher education (Winberg et al. 2011). But it differs regarding the contextualisation of research issues and the guidance of the students’ discovery act. Normally, discovery learning and work-integrated learning processes are stimulated by ‘real life’-oriented but constructed problems such as recontextualised case studies which students have to solve (Winberg et al. 2011, 11). At least, they can reflect their learning process and their results by sample solutions. In contrast, RBL aims at investigating issues which do not have scientific results yet (Schneider and Wildt 2009). Firstly, learning processes occur in authentic research contexts. Secondly, there is no sample solution which can be used for reflections. Therefore, other didactical approaches towards guiding the students’ research-based activities have to be applied.

RBL integrates a work-related perspective but it also imparts the basics of doing research work to students. In the project it is meant to connect aspects of economy, engineering/technology and sustainability by which students systematically experience and understand how scientists and professionals think and work. Through these scholarly activities students ought to
• gain basic knowledge of research principles and mechanisms,
• plan and realise research projects in their fundamentals,
• contribute to their individual development, learning success and academic capability as well as to the scientific progress,
• apply research methods and scientifically generated knowledge on ‘real world’ contexts, and
• learn how to work self-determined, to take over responsibility for findings received by working in groups, and how to guide RBL of their fellow students.

Generally, students do not have a repertoire of research methods. Therefore, they have to be guided by researchers and teachers in these respects and which may be described as follows.

3. Didactical Principles for Arranging Research-Based Learning
3.1. Defining and Exploring Research Issues
Every research work project is initiated by an issue which has to be explored and solved (Popper 2002). Therefore, ‘real world’ issues are adequate starting and reference points for students’ research-based learning. Such issues are generated by researchers and teachers in cooperation with representatives of international companies, local industry, communities or public institutions. On the one hand, the research topics raised serve as cognitive impulses as well as motivational stimuli for the students’ learning activities and their individual development. On the other hand, the issues connect theory, scholarly thinking to the students’ future world of academic work and professional life. Finally, solving scientific problems is meant to foster active, self-determined and collaborative learning procedures along with the acquisition of authentic and academic ‘real world’ experience (Schlicht 2012).

Common academic teaching, for example in lectures, seminars, often neglects ‘real world’ issues. It only refers to them in order to illustrate theory. In contrast, a RBL approach encourages students to use scientifically generated knowledge for discriminating and analysing their objects of investigation. Furthermore, students are expected to collaborate with academic experts and professionals from ‘real life’. They also have to organise themselves in teams or find a partner with whom they work. In more detail, the students’ learning activities include (Schneider and Wildt 2009):

• defining, examining and working on research problems in order to generate relevant scientific questions on the issue raised,
• acquiring theoretical knowledge and using documentary material in order to analyse, understand and solve these problems,
• operationalising the research object,
• preparing a draft for the investigation, selecting adequate research methods, and setting up appropriate instruments for the examination,
• considering carefully given answers,
• presenting and discussing solutions and research results,
• working out conclusions and qualifying the progress in knowledge and theory, which goes beyond merely reflecting the results of the research done.

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3.2 Learning Across the Disciplines and Promoting Meta-Cognition

RBL should be organised on interdisciplinary lines and with reflective practice. That means in the field of economics and management sciences connecting the perspectives of economy, technology/engineering and sustainability. On the one hand, an interdisciplinary approach enhances the students’ awareness of the issues’ complexity in this field. Furthermore, it prevents them from compartmental knowledge construction and stereotyped thinking (Neuweg 2007, 3). Additionally, learning across the disciplines does not only affect students in structuring and classifying their knowledge but also developing their capability of systematic and intersectional thinking. Besides, it allows students to approach the research issues from different points of view in order to find interdisciplinary solutions or innovative answers.

On the other hand, interdisciplinary thinking and working like scientists and experts require learning to think for oneself, to act self-determined and to reflect the own knowledge and problem-solving activities. In order to enhance the students’ abilities in meta-cognition, they should be given the opportunity to control and evaluate their own thinking, learning and acting in the process of problem-solving. As commonly known from investigations on teaching and learning, students do not automatically apply those meta-cognitive strategies in their studies. Therefore, they need to be encouraged and supported by researchers and lecturers, which fulfil their role like mentors (Gräsel, Fischer and Mandl 2001) which may be described as follows.

3.3 Learning by Teaching (Mentoring)

The above mentioned way of learning is inseparably linked to qualified and active guidance for students referring to their studies and assignments. We call this guidance mentoring. In contrast to traditional university teachers who mainly teach facts and findings in their lessons, mentors focus on organising and supervising the students’ activities. They create and maintain a learning environment that supports purposefully the students’ intrinsic motivation, fosters their interest in research, and assists them in their social interactions as well as in gaining independence in scholarly thinking and problem-solving (Klauser 1999).

In order to reach successfully these high performance standards, it is essential that students take over the role of a teacher from time to time like a ‘teacher’s role in miniature’ (see Allen 1983). When students switch their learner’s role to a teacher’s position they show responsibility in the process of learning and problem-solving. This means that students are involved in the activities of a mentor and in supervising scholarly exercises. It includes that students prepare adequate social learning settings such as working in pairs or groups, and may guide their fellow students in processing the given assignments. Furthermore, the students might also investigate special aspects of a topic, and consequently act as experts for their fellows by being able to coach and teach them basically. Didactical methods by which a role switching in teaching and learning processes can be done successfully are known as ‘reciprocal teaching’ (Rosenshine and Meister 1994), ‘jigsaw’ (Clarke 1994), ‘group investigation’ (Sharan and Sharan 1994), and ‘cooperative teaching script’ (O'Donnell and Dansereau 1992).

3.4 Varying the Degrees of Complexity and Difficulty

RBL has to occur on different levels in terms of undergraduate and graduate studies. The undergraduate courses at the Faculty of Economics and Management Science at Leipzig University (all with a 3-year Bachelor degree) are primarily designed for job qualification. Nevertheless, students acquire the fundamentals of scholarly work and research. Assignments on research questions need to show the right level of difficulty allowing students both to connect their previous knowledge with the tasks required like a ‘phase of the next step further’ according to Wygotski (1964) and to work on it with a mentor at their side.

The graduate courses aim at qualifying students for their career as well as for scholarly work. Therefore, graduate students must encounter theories and research methods in order to reflect and to use them in the process of solving complex scientific questions and real life problems. As young scholars they are expected to gain specialised knowledge, to discriminate current questions of research and recognition, and to set up solutions that are based on theory.

3.5 Evaluating Achievements and Organising Elaborated Feedback

Achievements of the students have to be evaluated based on performance criteria (Schneider and Wildt 2009) and graded with marks and credit points. Additionally, the evaluation should consider the students’ views of themselves and the feedback perspective of extra-university partners and institutions. In our project, the assessment takes three points in time (at the beginning, during the problem-based learning process, after the presentation of solutions and research results), and it considers oral and written enquiries in the style of open and closed questions.

What should be pointed out is that the evaluation of achievements does not only refer to grading students’ performance, but also to coaching their development and to maintaining the quality of renewed scholarly teaching. That is why the students are asked to reflect and to evaluate their achievements and learning progress. An elaborated feedback enables them both to recognise and understand their errors and to improve their academic skills in the field of RBL (Hattie and Timperley 2007).
4 Curricular Approach towards Integrating Research-Based Learning into Undergraduate and Graduate Courses

4.1 Research-Based Learning Cycle

In order to organise RBL and to integrate the above mentioned didactical principles into undergraduate and graduate courses we adopted the sequencing ideas of Schneider and Wildt (2009) and established four structural elements composing a cycle of several scholarly activities (see figure 1):

- a **marketplace** where ‘real life’ meets with sciences,
- a **workshop** where scientific investigations are founded and prepared,
- a **laboratory** where the investigations are carried out, and
- a **studio** where the results of the investigations are presented, reflected and exploited.

Figure 1: Research-Based Learning Cycle

Adopted from Schlicht (2012, 191).

4.2 Marketplace: Science meets Practice

The cycle starts at the marketplace. There, local industries, enterprises, communities, and public institutions meet with sciences, or in other words, their problems are questioned scientifically. Research issues are explored and objectives for investigations are defined.

For example, we conducted such a marketplace with an automobile factory located in Leipzig. The engineers asked for assistance in solving a problem they struggled against in the production process. What was the situation? Some windscreens were untight and caused financial loss. In the best case scenario the engineers would have been able to discover the defect before delivering the car. In the worst case scenario customers would have made complaints about non-wind and non-waterproof screens and would have wanted their money back. In fact, the engineers were looking for effective interventions to increase the production-quality. However, they could not explain exactly who or what caused the problem. They stressed that all possible technical solutions had been carried out, and they assumed that mistakes were mostly caused by workers. The students and researchers first task was to define the issue in terms of science. Therefore, they visited the assembling line and observed the production and working process.

Such an exploration is necessary to enable the students to formulate research questions and to define objectives for their studies. Afterwards, a workshop takes place, where students’ research questions and objectives are transformed into a scientific investigation. The marketplace does not serve exclusively as starting point of RBL but is also the forum where the found solutions are presented and discussed with project partners, and where further research tasks are identified (see below section 4.5).
4.3 Workshop: Founding and Preparing Scientific Investigations

In a workshop the students develop concrete ideas for a research design and determine the procedure of the research project. Firstly, the preparation concerns selecting theories and approaches, proposing hypotheses, working out models and describing the object of investigation in operationalised categories. Secondly, the students have to choose appropriate research methods with the help of mentors, develop a set of categories and instruments for the investigation, and they have to decide on the steps to be taken. In order to do these tasks properly, they need to learn how models of research in business and social sciences (see e.g. Friedrichs 1990) as well as research methods could be assessed, chosen and applied to investigations of ‘real world’ issues (e.g. interview guidelines, scales, questionnaires). It includes reading relevant publications and specialist literature. At last, they have to examine the suitability of methods for answering the research questions.

In the automobile case the students had to conduct a literature and content analysis with respect to models of the manufacturing process, technical parts and learning theories. Mentors guided them by providing literature lists and discussing the selected theories and models in groups. Furthermore, the students had to investigate routine-tasks which workers have to learn and apply precisely to the assembly line. Finally, it was the students’ task to suggest scientifically based methods to improve the workers performance. This step was carried out in the laboratory.

4.4 Laboratory: Experimenting and Realising Investigations

A laboratory mainly serves to apply learnt research-based knowledge. The students use selected research methods, developed sets of categories and instruments for the investigation. They compile data in field tests, develop drafts and technical drawings, carry out experiments, and test developed approaches and solutions. The collected data are analysed and interpreted by the students based on statistical procedures (e.g. via SPSS). Otherwise the students carry out content-related analyses. Beyond this, the laboratory is the place where empirical data are interpreted, findings are related back to the initial theses and/or theories and new hypotheses are derived for further research.

Regarding the car manufacturing issues the students realised field studies and applied participatory observations to the assembly investigating how workers do their job exactly, what kind of support they get for activating their attention to routine tasks and which instructions are provided for example for newcomers. Besides, the students related their findings back to selected memory and learning theories based on primary education. As a result, they constructed some rules for memorising special positions and orders of technical parts with the help of pictures, rhymes and analogies. Afterwards, the students’ results were written up and presented in the studio.

4.5 Studio: Reflecting and Presenting Learning Results

The studio’s purpose is utilising and exploiting the students’ research findings. On the one hand, these findings are written up in their papers, treatises and bachelor’s/master’s thesis. The students are expected to acquire by self-study efforts the necessary skills for writing proper academic texts, research reports and for preparing presentations of their findings. In the same context, the results are scrutinised as to exploit them for academic/scholarly teaching and publication.

On the other hand, the students depict to what extent their findings can help solving real life questions/complex problems. Besides, they reflect critically the procedure of their research work, consider thoroughly the methods applied and discuss in groups how to conduct further investigations more efficiently. The whole process is supervised by researchers. In addition, the researchers think about how to use the results for teaching, publication and further research activities. But RBL does not end in the studio. The found solutions are finally presented and discussed with the project partners at the marketplace.

At the marketplace the research-based learning cycle ends and instantaneously starts there again. Solutions are not only presented but further research tasks are identified as well. Thus, the marketplace operates on different levels in the process of RBL. On the one hand, it coordinates the demand for and the supply of research projects/work and is expected to keep them in balance. It is the place where the frame for research is shaped and determined together with project partners (e.g. automobile factory in Leipzig, several enterprises of energy and water industries), and where the students’ research works are initiated and largely stimulated. Real life partners contribute complex business assignments, scenarios and challenges to the marketplace on which they work together with university teachers and students of different disciplines in order to transform the problems into scientific questions and to find suggested answers for them.

On the other hand, the marketplace establishes a bridge between theory and real world. Students present their suggested answers. They discuss topics of research which are still to be worked on together with their university teachers and project partners. By doing so, students can use, enlarge and also modify their knowledge when recognising fact-based and methodological gaps in their understanding.

Finally, the marketplace is the place where the framework for research is determined together with the partners and where the research work of students is largely stimulated. They are supposed to increase their interest in the subject studied and in the object of investigation. At the moment we are conducting an evaluation. The first data underline that significant learning and motivational effects can be received.
5 Conclusion

The project results gave rise to optimism concerning the effects of the presented approach to RBL. However, there are further tasks to be done in order to improve its arrangement and in order to integrate the approach into the current bachelor and master program structures permanently. This concerns in particular the question of how the complexity and the difficulty for undergraduate and graduate students could be varied. On the one hand variation has to be done with respect to the different requirements of undergraduate and graduate programs. On the other hand the students’ individual learning conditions and different needs of assistance have to be considered.

In addition, further research and discussion should be conducted on the question of how different forms of long-term cooperation between university, industry and community could be established. Long-term cooperation leads to a situation where ‘real world’ issues can matter to academic capability. This comes along with the question about to what extent the (practical) problem-oriented RBL approach can be applied to other fields or to what extent field-specifics and theoretically derived problems have to be taken into account. Finally, it should be debated to what extent students can contribute to the fields’ scientific progress, or how ‘real world’ problems and research issues respectively should be didactically arranged in order to allow students such contributions.

Notes

1 Workshops are often integrated in higher education of teachers and prospective professionals working in educational contexts (see Schubert 2003).

2 Studying in a laboratory is a substantial element of higher education especially in fields of engineering, physics and life sciences (see e.g. Behr et al. 2006; Bruchmüller 1993).

3 For example, the studio concept is widely established in higher education in art and architecture. According to Schön (1984) studios support a ‘reflection-in-action’ in these fields.

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Successful Student Learning: does it matter?

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Abstract

This paper reports on a follow-up study that was conducted during the course of the 2012 academic year on successful student learning at a historically black university in South Africa. The study aimed to test the validity of the claim made by researchers that successful learning in the first year of study is a good indicator of success in the subsequent years (Leibowitz 1994, 2001; Louw 2005; Scott 2009). The study’s theoretical orientation draws on social cultural theory proposed by Vygotsky (1979, 1994) and social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986, 2001) as well as student learning theories put forward by Killen (2005, 2010); Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt and Associates (2005), and Strydom and Mentz (2010) on a supportive and conducive learning environment which enhances successful learning. A group of twelve students who were the participants in the study are the same group of students who participated in an initial study during the 2009/2010 academic years. The aim was to determine whether or not they have sustained their level of success in their second and third year of their degree programmes. The findings revealed that the majority of the students did sustain their successful pass rate and completed in the prescribed time, thus providing evidence for the assertion that successful student learning in the first year of study is a predictor for success in the subsequent years.

Key words: Higher education, student learning, first year, subsequent years, completion rate, enabling factors.

Introduction

Successful student learning does matter. It matters because research conducted on the performance of students in higher education in South Africa indicates that there is a high failure and dropout rate among the 16% of youth who make it to university study (Bunting 2004; CHE 2009, 2010; Louw 2005; Scott 2009). Given the historical context and socio-economic backgrounds of most Black student cohorts, successful student learning matters because the country is in need of graduates and skilled people who can make a productive contribution to economic growth and prosperity. It also matters because education can improve the quality of people’s lives and it can empower a nation. This paper reports on a follow-up study that was conducted during the course of the 2012 academic year on successful student learning. The follow-up study is based on research that was carried out on two groups of registered first-year students’ academic progress at a historically black university (HBU) in South Africa during the 2009 and 2010 academic years. The initial study focused on the learning experiences of first year students and attempted to determine what the factors were that made successful learning possible. Students’ progress was tracked over the first eighteen months of study and the objective was twofold. Firstly, to identify what the challenges to learning were experienced by both groups of students, and secondly, to identify what the enabling factors were which allowed successful learning to occur. The first group of students (referred to as Case 1) could not pass all their first year modules at the end of 2009 and thus were less successful in their studies. The second group (referred to as Case 2) managed to pass all their first year modules and was the successful group. The findings of that study resulted in a list of challenges to learning and a list of enabling factors. Based on these two lists, recommendations for a supportive and holistic learning approach were made.

The follow-up study which this paper reports on focuses on the successful group (Case 2). The students were registered for two three-year degree programmes, namely B.Com General and B. Admin in a business faculty. The aim of this follow-up study was to determine whether or not the successful group of students could maintain their success in the second and third year of their degree programme; many researchers are of the opinion that the first year of study is a good indicator of what will happen in the subsequent years (Bajinath 1997; Leibowitz 1994, 2001; Schalkwyk, Leibowitz and Van der Merwe 2009; Scott 2009).

The paper is thus concerned with how successful learning occurred for Black student cohorts at a HBU from the first year to the final year. It is in agreement with the view of many researchers that successful learning for Black student cohorts in higher education is of the utmost importance for the country and the future of the youth (Bunting 2004; CHE 2009, 2010; Letseka and Maile 2008; Scott 2009; Webb 2002). Consequently, the identification of enabling factors for successful learning is needed to assist, guide and direct future Black student cohorts to succeed in their studies, and in so doing, eradicate failure and dropouts.
The theoretical orientation

The theoretical orientation in the initial study used Vygotsky’s social cultural theory (1979, 1994) and Bandura’s social cognitive theory (1986, 2001). It also drew on Barnett’s philosophical approach to student learning described in A Will to Learn: Being a Student in an Age of Uncertainty (2007). This study builds on these theories and augments them with student learning theories put forward by Killen (2005, 2010), Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt and Associates (2005) and Strydom and Mentz (2010) on the influence of a supportive and conducive learning environment.

Vygotsky’s (1979, 1994) social cultural theory encompasses three important factors about human development and human learning. The first factor is that Vygotsky acknowledges that human development and learning does not occur in isolation, but within a social network of family, friends, communities and the broader environment. From this one could infer that human beings’ development and learning is constructed and influenced by the family’s background, beliefs, culture, language and socio-economic status. The second factor is that Vygotsky’s theory explains that learning is developmental and that human beings, and thus students, need guidance and assistance in the learning process in order to develop their full potential in his “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky 1979, 131). Lastly Vygotsky’s theory also accounts for the differences in socio-economic and political power and why there is a huge disparity in the labour force of a country and in the spread of wealth and resources in his explanation of the consequences of capitalism. Vygotsky’s social cultural theory therefore gives an account of how human beings develop on a macro level and within a broader framework.

On the other hand, Bandura’s (1986, 2001) social cognitive theory provides a strong account of the individual development on a micro level. Bandura (1986,18) explains human functioning “in terms of a model of triadic reciprocal causation in which behaviour, cognitive and other personal factors, and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants of each other.” He (1986, 51) argues that “learning is largely an information-processing activity” and that human beings acquire behaviour patterns from people whom they observe. His theory “subscribes to a model of emergent interactive activity” which in turn differentiates among three different modes of agency, namely personal, proxy and collective agency which human beings use to develop and learn (Bandura 2001, 3). Personal agency refers to the cognitive, motivational, affective and choice processes of individuals; proxy agency refers to the social conditions and institutional practices that affect people’s everyday lives. Bandura (2001,13) explains that people rely on other people who are in position of power to act on their behalf and to secure the outcome they want (proxy agency). Collective agency refers to people’s shared belief in their collective power to produce wanted results and it serves the same role of personal efficacy beliefs and functions through similar processes (Bandura 2001,14).

The process of making choices in personal agency resonate with Barnett’s (2007) notion of “will” in learning. Barnett (2007) takes a philosophical approach to student learning in higher education and makes the student central in the learning process. He (2007,15) states, “will is the most important concept in education. Without a will, nothing is possible. At any level of education, a pupil, a student cannot make serious progress unless she has a will to do so”. He provides two reasons for making this claim, firstly by explaining that students are adults and are at university out of their own “wittingness”, and secondly, that they are commencing “on a major personal project of their own” (Barnett 2007,15). Barnett (2007,16) further states that the student is making a commitment “to herself and of herself”, and that “it is a matter of the student having a will to learn, and that will being sustained over time”. The commitment “to herself and of herself” is a “double commitment” that the student makes. Barnett (2007,16) explains that the first commitment is a “practical” commitment — the student is committing herself to making the time to study, while the second commitment is “an ontological” commitment — “the student wills herself to accept the discipline that her studies will bring”. This implies that the student is willingly and consciously making the choice to study and to succeed in the learning process. The paper argues that such a choice is an important one to make for any student who wants to be successful in his/her studies because it would be the ‘will to learn’ that would compel a student to apply his or her agency effectively and that would assist the student to persevere when challenges arise.

Although Vygotsky’s and Bandura’s theories differ in approach, they depict human development and learning as the interplay and interconnectivity of human behaviours and actions in the environment in which human beings live and function. In addition, Vygotsky’s social cultural theory also provides an explanation of the socio-economic status of the student participants in this study. The students in this study came from low income and poor families and under-resourced schooling as a result of apartheid which is why many of them fail and dropout of higher education. Furthermore, it was deemed important to consider the views of Killen (2005, 2010), Kuh et al. (2005) and Strydom and Mentz (2010) about how successful learning takes place against the backdrop of Vygotsky and Bandura’s theories. Killen (2005, 2010) talks about nine principles of successful learning which he adopted from Brandt (1998). Four of the nine principles are directly applicable to this study, namely - learning is developmental; much learning occurs through social interaction; a positive emotional climate strengthens learning; and the total environment influences learning. Kuh et al. (2005) and Strydom and Mentz (2010) identified five benchmarks of effective educational practices in their discussion of what makes successful learning possible. Two of the five benchmarks, collaborative learning and a supportive and conducive learning environment resonate with Killen’s learning principles and with Vygotsky and Bandura’s social learning theories.

The theoretical orientation therefore, enables a holistic view of learning – a view of the individual students within a social context. It further demonstrates the interrelatedness and interdependence of the factors identified and discussed in the analysis, while the learning principles and benchmarks authenticate the issues identified and reported on by the students in this study.
Research Design

A case study design was used in 2009 and 2010. It focused on a specific faculty and a specific cohort of students (Leibowitz 2001; Holliday 2001; Yin 2009) and allowed for the use of multiple sources of data (Babbie and Mouton 2001) that were analysed on the basis of an analytical framework. The analytical framework facilitated the identification of the first-year students’ specific needs in the learning environment, the challenges to learning which they had to deal with and how the challenges impacted on their academic progress. It also allowed for the identification of enabling factors which were the pathways to success for some of them. Lastly, it made it possible to isolate and highlight the factors and practices that distinguished the successful students from the unsuccessful ones.

As mentioned in the introduction, the participants in the first study were comprised of two groups of new first year students in 2009. The first group was referred to as Case 1 and consisted of 20 students, and the second group was referred to as Case 2, with twelve students. The students in Case 1 were less successful in their first year of study because they did not pass all the required modules at the end of the year. The students in Case 2 were the successful students because they had passed all the first year modules.

It is Case 2, the successful group of twelve students whose data is being used in this follow-up study. Eight of the twelve students were registered for the B. Com General three-year degree programme and four for the B. Admin three-year degree programme. The students had to complete their studies by the end of 2011. While multiple data selection methods were used in the initial study in 2009 and 2010, only two sets of data were collected for this study. The first data set was the students’ academic records which provided proof of completion or not, while the second data set was a written reflection which each student was asked to write. They had to explain how they sustained their pass rate each year, and whether or not they had done things differently compared to their first year of study.

Analysis of final results

The students’ academic records show that seven of the twelve students sustained their performance in 2010 and 2011 thereby completing their studies successfully at the end of 2011. They graduated in the March 2012 graduation ceremony. Two of the seven students sustained an average of 75% and above, and completed cum laude and summa cum laude respectively. Five of the seven students continued with postgraduate studies in 2012.

A further two students completed their studies at the end of the first semester 2012 and graduated in the September 2012 graduation ceremony. The remaining three students could complete their studies at the end of 2012 if they pass the outstanding third year modules and could, therefore, graduate in March 2013. The fact that not one of the twelve students dropped out and that nine of the twelve students completed and graduated in 2012 provides evidence for the claim made that success in the first year of study is a good indicator for success in the subsequent years.

Discussion

The qualitative data in the initial study were categorised under two categories, challenges to learning and overcoming the challenges. These two categories were further divided into four themes - personal factors, academic factors, social factors and institutional factors. The issues identified and reported on by the students were divided and categorised under these four themes as sub-themes. The twelve students identified five challenges to learning under the theme personal factors which were - inadequate accommodation, lack of financial means, lack of family support, learning with a disability and lack of career opportunities. They also identified five challenges under the theme academic factors, namely the transition from high school to university, their inability to manage their time effectively, a perceived heavy workload, a lack of foundational knowledge and a lack of resources at home. They did not identify any sub-themes under the theme social factors as challenges to learning, but rather reported on how choosing the right friends was important. Lastly, they identified two challenges to learning under the theme institutional factors, namely inadequate tutorial support and finding the teaching methods and style of a lecturer problematic. The initial study discussed these challenges in detail and also how the students overcame them (see McGhie 2012, Chapter 5 and 6). Based on the findings in the initial study, the following sub-themes were identified as enabling factors which would allow for successful learning to take place:

Personal factors:

- A good support system (that can provide motivation and encouragement);
- A need to be focused and goal driven (attitude and personal orientation);
- Comprehensive financial assistance (allowing students to focus on learning);
- Hard work, dedication and commitment (thus a strong will to learn); and
- Suitable accommodation (to avoid the challenges of travel).
**Academic factors:**

- Adjustment to the University environment;
- A home environment that is conducive to work and study;
- Attendance of all classes and submission of all coursework components;
- A willingness to ask questions and consult lecturers;
- Effective time management and study techniques;
- Study groups for moral and academic support (the ‘right’ friends);
- The need for language support;
- The need for sufficient background knowledge; and
- The need to understand the subject content.

**Social factors:**

The right friends (in order not to not be exposed to negative peer pressure).

**Institutional factors:**

- The provision of academic support;
- The provision of moral support and encouragement; and
- The provision of sufficient resources.

The findings in the initial study signaled that factors for failure and success were not only located in the student, the institution and the higher education department, but they also required the participation of especially the students’ family and friends. These constitute the environmental factors that Vygotsky (1979, 1994) and Bandura (1986, 2001) propose. The findings also underlined the fact that successful learning is a complex and multi-layered process that is ongoing and that needs to be monitored, sustained and evaluated throughout (Beyer, Gillmore and Fisher 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005).

The students indicated in their responses in 2012 that they still thought that the above enabling factors were significant. However, they added two more factors. One, because their families supported and motivated them, they work harder in order not to disappoint them. Second, they reported that other students realised that they were successful and asked them to explain the work to them.

The first factor implies that their will to learn and to succeed in their studies was strengthened even further due to the fact that their families supported and motivated them. The “will to learn” as Barnett (2007) argues, shows the students’ commitment to themselves and to the learning process. It resulted in intrinsic motivation that had, as a consequence, determination and hard work (Cohen and Dornyei 2002; Oxford 2001). Cohen and Dornyei (2002) and Oxford (2001) argue that intrinsic motivation is based on the fact that students are interested in what they are learning, and the driving force is not external rewards, but internal happiness and satisfaction. In addition, Biggs (1999, 60) suggests that “intrinsic motivation drives deep approaches to learning and the best academic work”. The two students who completed their degrees cum laude and summa cum laude provide support for “best academic work”.

Moreover, the support received from their parents became another driving force providing further motivation to remain hard working, focused and committed. Responses were (quoted verbatim):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My family is all very supportive and encouraging. Although their expectations for me is high – it pushes me to work hard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My family and friends have been very supporting throughout this whole process, which encourages me even more, and every day I wake up and realise the little things in my life and how important they are towards shaping the mentality of an individual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My life, my family, my home and my community are my inspiration to go forward, to strive for perfection and reach for the stars even if I might never come to know how it feels like to be there. These are all the reasons that keep me going and determined to succeed with everything in me, which further reflects in my academic work. This is the reason why I passed.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

These responses demonstrate that support from family and friends is an important enabling factor, in line with Killen’s (2010) learning principles and one of the five benchmarks of effective educational practices as identified by Kuh et al. (2005) and built upon by Strydom and Mentz (2010). But it also makes obvious the social nature of human development and learning which Vygotsky (1979,1994) advocates, and the application of their agency capabilities as explained by Bandura (1986, 2001).

Furthermore, explaining the work and assisting their fellow students strengthened not only their own understanding of the work, but also boosted their self-confidence and resulted in better performance. It is especially the three students who managed to obtain an average
of 75% and above at the end of their first year who became group leaders and mentors to their peers. They provided much needed academic support to their fellow students and at the same time, strengthened their own chances of passing the subjects well. These three students were self-regulating students who employed specific learning strategies to achieve their academic goals (Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons 1992, 185-203).

Therefore, the students' responses indicate that they not only understood the learning goals, but they were actively involved in collaborative and peer learning which, according to Kuh et al. (2005) and Strydom and Mentz (2010), enhanced their own active learning and gave them opportunities to practise what they learnt. Tinto (1975, 2000) is also of the opinion that interaction with peers for both academic and social support is important and could impact positively on students integration to the university and their persistence levels.

The fact that support as enabling factor is re-occurring under all four themes is significant and accentuates the fact that there is need for a safe and supportive learning environment in which students' affective needs are being met (Killen 2002, 2010; Kuh et al. 2005; Strydom and Mentz 2010). For example, both groups of students in the initial study in 2009 identified having a good support system as an essential element for successful learning under the theme personal factors. The successful group identified study groups for moral and academic support under academic factors as important, and making and choosing the right friends under social factors as imperative, while both groups of students made the same suggestions for the institution under institutional factors – that it should provide academic support, moral support and encouragement to students. Now, two years later, the support factor comes to the fore again. However, this time it became the driving force for optimal performance and collaborative learning which reinforces researchers such as Beyer, Gillmore and Fisher (2007), Killen (2005, 2010), Kuh et al. (2005), Strydom and Mentz's (2010) argument that a supportive and conducive learning environment is needed for successful learning to occur.

In addition, it also draws attention to the theoretical orientation of this study – the fact that learning is socially situated and constructed. The support which the students identified as a need for successful learning, involves all the different role players and clearly indicates that the students cannot be successful on their own. First and foremost, support is needed from the students' families, and in the African context, also the extended family. Secondly, support is needed from friends and peers – fellow students who can provide not only moral support, but academic support and therefore assist with and maintain other students' successful social and academic integration to the university's environment. Thirdly, support from the institution is needed which will also aid students' social and academic integration in the university environment. However, in order for the institution to provide the necessary support in the form of qualified lecturing and administrative staff, as well as the provision of other resources, the institution needs financial support from the higher education department. Thus, providing support to students is needed from all the role players in the learning process. The students' responses and the fact that they could complete their degrees in the prescribed time, reiterates the fact that students' successful integration, both socially and academically into the university environment, is vital. Consequently, the successful group of students in this study provides further evidence to support Tinto's (1975) student integration model for retention and success in the subsequent years of study.

Conclusion

This paper reported the experiences of a successful group of students and documented the important enabling factors which assisted them to be successful in their studies. The social nature of learning emerged from the analysis of the data. Students could not be successful on their own. It would be fair to suggest that the issues identified and reported on by the students in both studies highlight the need for a more integrated and holistic approach to student learning. Such an approach would acknowledge that the themes and sub-themes identified and discussed were interrelated and interdependent and that successful learning is socially situated and constructed.

The question that needs to be asked is - what can institutions of higher learning learn from these findings and what should be in place for successful learning to occur for especially Black student cohorts? Ramsden (1992, 18) states “…that differences in the quality of learning are due to differences in the ways that students go about learning; and these differences can in turn be explained in terms of their experiences of teaching. We can only improve the quality of education if we study its effects on students and look at the experience through their eyes”. This study attempted to look at the experiences of students ‘through their eyes’ and the students provided a list of enabling factors – issues which they suggested should be in place for successful learning to occur.

Moreover, Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot and Associates (2005) state that research on student persistence reveals that the largest proportion of student dropouts occurs during the first year and prior to the second year of study. Institutions have come to understand that they need to both challenge and support the students they admit and make a commitment to help them succeed. Keenan (2011) seems to be in agreement with this stance in her discussion of the importance of institutions to provide students with a structured and supportive process that students can engage with. It is therefore suggested that institutions of higher learning should not only be aware of the enabling factors, but should assist, direct and guide incoming students towards them, and fulfil their own part as well.

Tinto (1993) developed three principles of effective retention that guide institutional practices to reduce student rates of departure. He suggested that institutions should commit to the students they serve – this means that institutions should care about students’ well-being and should support them. Support was the enabling factor which the students identified in all four themes. Secondly, institutions should commit to the education of all their students, not just some of them. Tinto (1993) argues that it is the responsibility of the institution to make
sure that new students have or receive the opportunity to possess sufficient knowledge and skills to meet the academic demands of the institution. Lastly, institutions should commit to the development of supportive social and educational communities in which all students are integrated as capable members. He (1993) is of the opinion that institutions should involve students in the daily life of the institution and provide social and intellectual support for their individual efforts. There should be frequent and rewarding contact between faculty, staff and students in multiple settings both inside and outside of the classroom.

Successful student learning should matter for every person involved in higher education in South Africa. It is recommended that institutions of higher learning address the suggestions made by Tinto, and consider the enabling factors that have been highlighted in order to effect change. Change should take place in the lives of the student population, in the mindsets of their staff, and in the attitude and perceptions of all the role players in the learning process. It is possible to enhance Black students’ performance if all the stakeholders work together, acknowledge that every student who enters higher education has potential to succeed and commit themselves to provide all students with a supportive and conducive learning environment. Therefore, successful student learning matters and should be made possible for everyone in South Africa who has the will to learn.

References


Why we do what we do: Interrogating our academic staff development practice

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Abstract

Higher education in general is experiencing increasing calls for an expansion of interventions aimed at supporting lecturers in the development of their teaching. An aspect that is often overlooked by the authors of such calls, is an understanding of what it takes to design and develop these interventions, and who chooses to engage with this work and why.

The provision of academic staff development opportunities in teaching at UCT has taken on various forms over the past ten years. This paper is an initial report on a self-reflective study of our roles as significant actors in these initiatives in which we describe the methodological approach we have developed. Our approach has focused on three aspects within the cultural domain, namely capturing the narratives of the participants, identifying key themes and Discourses and understanding the situational logic evident in our contexts.

Each of the authors travelled a different journey into (and out of) academic staff development. We hope that this study will contribute to an understanding of how the roles of academic staff development practitioners come to be defined and how such practitioners address the challenges that they face and take advantage of opportunities that arise.

Keywords: academic staff development; Agency; Institutional change; self-reflection

ORIGINS OF OUR PROJECT

This project originates from an NRF multi-institutional investigation into the contextual influences on the professional development of academics as teachers in higher education in South Africa (SA) and seeks to insert the perspective and experience of academic staff development (ASD) practitioners alongside the other dimensions of the larger study. The central question that it seeks to answers is “Why we do what we do?” The authors constitute the project research team at UCT, one of the eight case studies under investigation. In this article we use collective self-reflection consisting of interviews, one to two pages of writing and recorded conversations, to interrogate our understandings of our growing identities as academic staff development practitioners.

Efforts to increase access to higher education and to ensure equity in student success in South African higher education, has focussed attention on the effectiveness of teaching with increasing demands for teaching development opportunities to be incorporated into the academic career path (HESA 2011).

There is also a rising popular discourse that emphasises the overwhelming difficulties experienced by academics in their role as educators. Reasons often put forward for these difficulties include the failure of the school system to prepare students for tertiary study, the increasing numbers of students and accompanying increase in class size, and the diverse student body characterised by significantly different levels of performance of students by race. There is a gradual recognition that without paying attention to the development of educational expertise academics are not going to be able to address these challenges in their educational practice (HESA 2011).

WHO WE ARE

The four of us are white academic staff at the University of Cape Town (UCT), with experience drawn from working in four departments within the Centre of Higher Education Development (CHED) from 1988 until the present (2012). June, Jeff and Kevin are in their fifties while Glenda is in her thirties. We are engaged to varying degrees in academic staff development (ASD) and have worked at UCT for periods ranging from 12 to 26 years. Despite having worked alongside each other for several years, this NRF research project has provided the
first opportunity for us to reflect collectively and critically on the structures and culture of the UCT context in which we work. The project has also facilitated the emergence of our corporate agency as a group.

Jeff and June have formal teaching qualifications and share a long engagement with and commitment to teaching across multiple contexts, including secondary school. In contrast, Glenda and Kevin’s teaching career trajectories have been exclusively within the South African higher education context.

Kevin’s passage across three higher education institutions over the past 18 years, initially in a student academic support role, saw him leave his original discipline of church history and theology and move into the sociology of education.

Jeff joined UCT an 1988 a few years after the launch of the first Academic Support Programme (ASP). The establishment of CHED in 1999 and the formation of the Academic Support Development Group in 2004 provided an enabling framework for an institutional effort to support academics in their role as educators.

June joined the Faculty of Commerce Academic Development Programme in 2000. Although initially employed to manage and teach students, like Jeff, she soon began to work with academic staff in an effort to improve the learning environment within the faculty.

THEORETICAL FRAME

“Narrative inquiry is the study of people in relationship with people, places and things by researchers who themselves are in relationship with people, places, and things.” (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, cited in Craig 2009, 106)

Drawing on the frameworks of critical and social realism we have created and analysed a collaborative narrative from interviews and discussions amongst ourselves. Other studies that have used this kind of approach include a study of the experiences of female academics using “hermeneutic phenomenology” (Drame et al. 2012); a discussion amongst academics around key intellectual themes (Nixon et al 1998) and an exploration of underlying assumptions by four academic developers (McAlpine et al. 2009).

In our case we have engaged in a series of individual and collective activities involving writing, talking and reflecting about how we came to be involved in academic staff development, and why our activities have taken the form that they have. Furthermore we have used Margaret Archers’ concepts of structure, culture and agency as a lens with which to analyse our narratives.

Working primarily in the Cultural domain we have attempted to identify some of the key Discourses and the institutional situational logic (Archer 1996) at work arising out of the relationship between the Structural and Cultural emergent properties evident at UCT. In working
with the situational logic, we needed to identify key sets of ideas or beliefs evident in the environment and analyse how one set operates in relation to other set of ideas. At the highest level these sets of ideas stand in "logical contradiction or complementarity" to each other (Archer 1996, 229) according to whether they work against or in support of each other.

The holders of these different sets of beliefs find themselves operating within different situational logics which "predisposes toward totally different (formal) courses of action." (Archer 1996, 229).

Archer identifies two possibilities for sets of ideas that are in a contradictory relationship. The one is that they constrain each other’s development and correct themselves in order to be able to continue to exist alongside each other (correction). An example of such an idea evident in our narratives is that effective academic staff development can only occur from within a discipline, which is where June is located. In contrast is the view that effective academic staff development can be designed from a central institutional position and operate across disciplines, as is the case with Jeff and Glenda’s work.

In a second scenario the competing sets of ideas strive to eliminate the opposing view (elimination). In our context an idea that has in the main (although not completely) been eliminated is the view that black students are unable to succeed in “difficult” subjects such as Mathematics. This view stands in a competitive relationship to the view that all students can succeed, given the correct conditions for them to be able to learn.

Table 1: Situational Logics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situational logic</th>
<th>Contradictions</th>
<th>Complementarities</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Constraining</td>
<td>Competitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correction</td>
<td>Elimination</td>
<td>Protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of ideas</td>
<td>“Academic staff development programmes must happen within the discipline and cannot be run centrally”</td>
<td>“Black students can’t succeed at university”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Amongst the sets of ideas that exist in a complementary relationship Archer distinguishes between those that live in a concomitant as opposed to a contingent relationship with each other. In the case of the former, ideas might initially work in the same direction and appear to support each other but in the long term produce a result which begins to limit change through a narrowing of the sense of what is correct and how things must be done. The idea that reflects this situational logic in our experience is the one that calls for all academics to be required to undergo a certified course of training in teaching. While on one level this idea supports the expansion of professional development opportunities across the whole academic population, it has the potential to create a protective environment that works against reflexivity and critical engagement, and generates compliant behaviours both on the part of the ASD practitioners as well as academics.

The final category of contingent complementarities includes ideas that are happy to place no limit on variation and creativity. The idea that all innovative teaching is to be encouraged might foster creativity but whether it facilitates appropriate student learning might be in question. The flourishing of different practices could also result in fragmentation of approaches and the establishment of silos of practice with little in common except their tolerance of their right to be different.

DATA CAPTURE AND ANALYSIS

The data analysis process in our project had three main objectives

1. Capture the individual narratives.
2. Identify key themes from a critical and social realist perspective.
3. Identify the institutional situational logic in relation to a key set of ideas identified in the texts.

We were each interviewed by an external researcher. In these interviews we were asked to explain how and why we had become involved in ASD work. The interviews attempted to draw out the structural and cultural dimensions that we had encountered and the agential aspects of our stories. The interviews were transcribed (Texts A).
The first phase of analysis involved each author reading the interview of another member of the group and writing a short summary highlighting the key issues and themes in the interview (Text B). This summary also attempted to identify the main Structural and Cultural elements within the individual story. These summaries formed an important input into the second phase of analysis.

In the second phase each of the authors read all of the interviews and summaries and then we convened and engaged in a collective analysis of the interviews using structure, culture and agency as an overriding framework. This session took approximately 3 hours and was recorded and transcribed (Text C).

In the third phase the transcribed report of the collective analysis meeting (Text C) was itself collectively analysed in a 3 hour meeting and a key cluster of concepts were identified (see Table 2 below). Building on the understandings generated above we then each wrote a two page narrative reflecting on our own journey into ASD work (Texts D).

In the final phase of analysis that we describe here involved identifying key sets of ideas in our collective narrative that helped us to understand the various situational logics evident in the context within which we work.

FINDINGS

Our first analysis produced a table of key issues and themes that were evident across the four narratives (Table 2)

Table 2: Key themes and issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural issues</th>
<th>Cultural issues</th>
<th>Agency issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The emerging field of ASD</td>
<td>The place of “criticality”</td>
<td>Shifting identities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional dynamics – centre versus faculty</td>
<td>Academic autonomy</td>
<td>Role as change agent/ activist/ pioneer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of disciplines</td>
<td>Shifting Discourses</td>
<td>Building corporate agents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding sources and conditions</td>
<td>Clashes in Discourse</td>
<td>Sustainability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of external projects</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Responsive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our view of the field

The four narratives reveal similarities and differences in our experience of the field. Our language reflects the shifting nature of the work and associated labels from “academic support” a student facing operation that June, Jeff and Kevin first engaged with in their teaching in higher education, to “academic development” a broader label which included working with academic staff around design and development of curricula, teaching activities and assessment. Educational development is used as an even broader term including activities that involve developing institutional systems related to teaching. Glenda had a different experience having started her first job supporting academic staff in their use of educational technologies and helping to meet the associated institutional development needs.

Kevin’s comment that “people who come into academic development…[or] education development, … are driven by some level of activism rather than by disciplinary passion” is evident in particular within the narratives of Jeff and June.

The major societal changes evident over the period 1988-2012 relate to the transition of South Africa’s higher education system from pre- to post-Apartheid formations. June and Jeff’s narratives reflect their efforts to engage as actors in this highly racialised and politicised space. Working in this space has meant needing to counter dominant views which positioned students, in particular the new black students entering SA higher education, as deficient. While working from within small student-facing ASP-type contexts both June and Jeff provided pedagogical solutions to counter this Discourse. Their work helped to highlight how the dominant institutional disregard for the need for educational expertise and efficient educational design represented a fundamental deficiency, and was in need of correction. The tension between these two sets of ideas is an example of competitive contradictions (Archer 1995). This advocacy role continues today and provides the energy for some of their academic staff development work. Its aim is to eliminate particular stereotypes related to students and their behaviour, and to shift the Discourse from one of blaming the students, to one of investing in developing appropriate educational practice and institutional systems.

A second wave of change arises from the emergence of new teaching technologies that hold out all sorts of promises for low-cost, wide-

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scale learning. The new e-learning technologies have given rise to an array of advocates and activists. Glenda is centrally involved with this community of actors while the remaining authors also find themselves engaging with the challenges and possibilities afforded by the new learning technologies.

A further set of drivers evident in the interviews, are the quality assurance mechanisms put in place by professional accreditation bodies within disciplines such as engineering, health professions and accounting and the national Higher Education Quality Committee. These developments have created both challenges and opportunities for academic staff development. The rise of the quality assurance discourse has seen the emergence of contingent complementarities with the potential for both positive and negative consequences.

Finally the emergence of formal management regimes overseeing academic behaviours have seen the introduction of mechanisms for performance appraisal in particular in relation to teaching. While these developments are broadly regarded with suspicion by many academics they have also provided opportunities for new conversations about curriculum, about assessment and student learning. Hence they have given rise to a set of contingent complementarities in which the situational logic is one of opportunity.

**Academic Autonomy and Location issues**

The issue of location is a common thread across the four narratives and appears to be linked to academic autonomy and the practice of non-interference in the affairs of a discipline. The broad culture of academic autonomy supports a general fragmentation across the higher education community and results in a lack of cohesion across the institution often characterised by faculty and departmental “silos”. The strength or extent of this structural property places limits and opportunities on how academic staff developers may position themselves either as working within, or across disciplinary contexts.

The four authors bring different experiences of working within and across disciplines. Each of the authors identified a disciplinary entry point into higher education. Jeff was initially located within Engineering and shifted several years later to work in a central unit, CHED while June has remained working from within the Faculty of Commerce. Kevin has worked in both disciplinary and centrally located AD units across three institutions, while Glenda exited her original disciplinary home of Archaeology to engage directly with ASD work from within the central unit, CHED.

In contrast to the other three authors June has only worked from within a disciplinary context and finds it difficult to imagine how else it might work

> “the real frustration is that here you're sitting [in CHED and]… this is happening in this faculty… and where the hell are you and what credibility do you have because you’re not an insider you’re an outsider?”

**Building corporate agency**

Another common theme across the interviews has been on the investment in creating communities of practice to support individual academics in their efforts to innovate and improve their practice. Jeff talks about the development of the Centre for Research in Engineering Education (CREE) community to support those in the engineering faculty who wished to engage in educational research. June describes the development of the Commerce Education Group (CEG) in the Commerce faculty to support colleagues in their efforts to innovate and improve their own teaching practice, while Glenda uses seminars, workshops and symposia to draw together a community of e-learning practitioners and innovators across UCT. Both Kevin and Jeff incorporate community building strategies, such as observing each other’s teaching, in their work with new academics and new entrants to higher education studies. The practices point to the common view that the development of corporate agents is an effective way of facilitating changes in academic practice and ultimately institutional change.

**A dominant set of ideas**

Given the interim nature of this article we end with a dominant set of ideas that we feel plays a key role in shaping the UCT context in which we work. Since the development of the Academic Support Programme in the 80’s the view that our main investment needs to be in support of students in their learning has dominated the landscape. This student-focused perspective has associated with it a number of key ideas and concepts (see A in Table 3). It remains the dominant idea and captures a lion’s share of the resources (over 90% of the posts in CHED).

The need to invest in building academic educational expertise is an idea that has emerged in the course of this work and has a much shorter history. It is associated with a different set of ideas (B in Table 3) and remains marginalised and has access to very few resources. Both Jeff and June began their careers at UCT strongly aligned with A but increasingly shifted across to B. June’s current position requires that she finds a balance between these two foci, while Jeff and Glenda operate within the staff focus of B. We recognise that we operate within this marginal space and seek to exploit whatever complementarities might emerge as we engage with these two sets of ideas.
Table 3: A key set of ideas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A: Student-focus (long history)</th>
<th>B: Staff-focus (recent development)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Deficit</td>
<td>Systemic deficit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fill the gap</td>
<td>Curriculum development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support students</td>
<td>Build academics capacity for teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on student empowerment</td>
<td>Focus on staff empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve student environment</td>
<td>Focus on Institutional impact &amp; sustainability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assimilating/Mainstreaming</td>
<td>Develop Communities of practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme development</td>
<td>Dominance of critical reflection on practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enabling</td>
<td>Enabling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on throughput</td>
<td>Accountability discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on Graduate attributes</td>
<td>Pressure from Professional disciplines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapid technological innovation</td>
<td>Rapid technological innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>Transformation focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constraining</td>
<td>Constraining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic staff capacity</td>
<td>Academic Autonomy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reward systems</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accountability discourse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONCLUSION

In the course of this study we have found a rich space to explore our individual and collective understandings and practices. While both our narratives and the key themes and Discourses that we identified require further analysis, they have provided a framework for our emergent corporate agency in seeking to address both the challenges and possibilities of our academic staff development work.

REFERENCES


HESA see Higher Education South Africa.

