

## TAU PROJÉT REPORT

### PROJECT TITLE : FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TOWARDS LOW PASS RATE OF 2<sup>ND</sup> YEAR HISTORY STUDENTS

The formulation of the above title represents the climax of the researcher's pilgrimage with TAU PROJECT. Against this latter background must therefore be understood the factors that informed the very title :lecture room experiences which in turn dictated the research question and to an extent the *modus operandi* of engaging with the project.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

The scope of the research project is informed as well as justified by limited literature review on the proposed subject. Available literature does not exactly cover the identified subject of this proposed investigation. L. Kurt, C. Argyris, D. Schon, and M. Polanyi in their joint paper "Ideas, Thinkers and Practice; Learning Theory" have rather focussed on the diversified meaning of learning rather than on factors that impact learning at any level. In her paper entitled "Fostering Student Learning and Success through First-Year Programs" Mary Stuart Hunter has treated the transition to Post-secondary Learning wherein she has also given a picture of a typical first year student : "For new students, college presents a foreign set of norms, traditions, and rituals, and a new language and environment. The high school and the college educational cultures are quite different."<sup>1</sup> In one section of her paper she has also treated the question 'From Retention to Student Learning and Success.' S.O. A. Oladunjoye has exclusively written on "Promoting EFL Learning through Group Dynamics." C. Dowse and W. van Rensburg in "A hundred times we learned from one another" have put emphasis on collaborative learning. J. C.Bean in his paper entitled "Engaging Ideas – Teaching Thinking Through Revision"only upholds the importance of revision as an essential exercise in academic writing which he relates to critical thinking. In the latter context he further remarks thus:

"what our students need to understand is that for expert writers the actual act of writing causes further discovery, development and modification of ideas. If one examines the evolving drafts of an expert writer, one sees the messy, recursive process of thinking itself as new ideas emerge during the drafting process. Expert writers do extensive rewriting, the final product often being substantially different from the first drafts."<sup>2</sup>

#### RESEARCH QUESTION:

This research project is underpinned by the following research question:

- What are the factors influencing the poor performance of 2nd year History students at Fort Hare University?

The research question is premised on the + - 25% failure rate of History 200 level students despite the professed adherence by the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities to the prescribed 1<sup>st</sup> year admission criteria. The fact that a group such as the above would have had a full year of university experience has informed the above choice. The question of whether the English second language proficiency gives its beneficiaries an addedadvantage or not over other learners will also be investigated on the basis of history being a language intensive discipline.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Stuart Hunter : "Fostering Student Learning and Success through First-Year Programs", p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>J. C. Bean : "Engaging Ideas – Teaching Thinking Through Revision", p. 33.

The main goal of the project is to identify the common factor/s that affect the specified group and eventually defeat the ends of the desired outcomes by yielding unacceptably low throughput rate. The primary objective is to gain a clearer understanding of the causal factors of poor academic performance which does not seem to be influenced by neither the geographical-historical locations nor the resource statuses of feeder schools. The core of the summary therefore is an interrogation of the factors that affect the learning process and subsequently reflect in the poor throughput.

#### RESEARCH METHOD *cum* DATA COLLECTION:

The preliminary step was to craft an elaborate Questionnaire which was distributed to the identified group. The students were then asked to answer the questions anonymously. The impersonal responses in turn have served as invaluable data for the research. Here under is a report of the analysis of the responses which should pave the way forward by addressing the shortcomings and in the end make teaching and learning effective.

#### THE ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Indeed the responses to the Questionnaire have exposed a variety of factors that thwart the learning exercise for some learners and thereby produce a low pass rate which tarnishes the academic performance of the total group. Ironically it is this apparent negative revelation which has given the researcher a premise from which to derive and base the innovations the aims of which are to bring about a turnaround of the undesirable situation.

Some responses to the Questionnaire are a testimony that there is a recognisable percentage of learners who struggle to comprehend and interpret their study material. Their varied problems as elaborated in their responses revolve around the learners' being ill-equipped or not acquainted at all with the procedures of locating written historical sources in the library, a fact which inevitably pushes them to the internet surfing. The acknowledgement of the inability to cope with history workload I could readily link to the claim by some of being unable to manage their time. Another professed hurdle is the mastery of historical jargon/terminology, an enabling tool in the interpretation of historical concepts and questions. The length of time it takes to understand the logic behind historical concepts and the unavailability of tutors when and where they are most needed also came to the fore as challenges to be addressed by the respective department.

While responses to other Questions reflect that almost about 80% of the clientele acknowledge the academic support they get from the lecturers, the challenge to do more also reflects in the minimal percentage which claim that what they are given is just not enough. The latter perception could well be a question of why call us to do more when you give less. It is easy to pick up from the above attitude the inclination to be a dependant that to respond positively to academic development. One way of improving the situation alluded to above would be, *inter alia*, to engage tutors for learners at this level of study which has not been case to date.

More learners also acknowledge the usefulness of the course level Module Reader which becomes very user-friendly when read concurrently with the thematic summaries that the lecturers provide. Claims put forward in some of the responses that both the summaries and examples

given during the lecture exercise further enhance the understanding of the Reader-reading came across as an indictment to the non-lecture attendees who surely miss out on class discussions and interaction. To this latter category belong those learners who claim that there is no reader with some claiming that they have never been told where to get it, a fact which calls upon the department to find a strategy of encouraging lecture attendance. Unannounced short tests might be considered.

The admission by about 45% of the learners that they read recommended books against the majority who are honest enough to confess that they regard going to the library "a waste of time for anyone who has both the reader and the summaries" is indeed an interesting disclosure. Some however attribute their not patronising the library to the difficulty of understanding the content of relevant history books while some simply attribute their infrequent or *nil* visits to the library to their 'laziness to go and look for books when there is so much demand from courses other than history'. The time consuming cues of NSFAS have also been brought up as an additional excuse and this could be addressed by alerting the University Management to the problem and its progressive impact on routine academic activities.

Of even greater interest is the variety of rather illegitimate reasons given as responses where about 20% of students attributed their irregular lecture attendance to clashes between History and other subjects; history lectures coinciding with workshops' attendance; being drawn to other activities (*a recent revelation is that some irregular lecture attendees are in fact Disc Jockeys*) and thus relying on friends for feedback on work done during lectures. Other learners' responses are all testimonies of benefits derived from consultation where they stress the relaxation experienced during the one-on-one interview with the lecturer with the learner getting feedback on all tasks and tests - 'only if it could be easy to make time for such consultations'!

The need for regular tutorial classes for this group level is very explicit in some responses where learners have admitted to have gone to the extent of soliciting help from senior students, TLC (*which is in order*), tutors designated for History 100 Level. The desperation of the situation can also be easily sensed in one student's response "I think there should be some extra classes". (*To address the latter the HR would be approached through the Dean's Office with regard to beefing up of both the departmental human resources and budget*).

In the responses that relate to scores from assignments being satisfactory or not it has emerged that learners are keen and determined to improve marks from this kind of assessment while at the same time they acknowledging their poor strategies in tackling the assignment writing. The admission that the language of instruction, in this case English, does not make understanding historical concepts easier comes forth while the majority expresses that being taught in the mother tongue would not only pull them backwards but would also isolate them from the wider world. A sizeable percentage admitted that they did never give themselves enough time to research and prepare assignments.

The 90% learners' responses to the question of availability of academic support to boost their writing skills and its subsequent manifestation on their scores is a unanimous testimony to the effect that this kind of support is ever readily available for whoever makes time for it.

Jessie Pick-Sarver's testimony about the reality of the existence of "sophomore slump" is of great

interest. Her remark (*recalled from her college days*) that “when someone mentioned it, I thought he was fabricating ..... I was wrong; the sophomore slump exists. I believe that most sophomore go through this period without recognizing what it is, because this “slump” is different for every student.<sup>3</sup>McBurnie, Campbell, West in their paper define the ‘Sophomore Slump’ as a “lack of engagement that can be experienced by students entering their second year at University.”<sup>4</sup>The earlier claim that the group identified for this investigation would have spent a whole year at university which truth seems to buttress the above claims about the ‘sophomore slump’ justifies this investigation all the more in order to be able to get to the root causes of students’ apathy and or failure to leave up to the standards of the first effort and subsequently to forestall the ‘Sophomore Slump’.

The fact that some of the responses to the Questionnaire have inherent remedial measures does not preclude the researcher and/or any educator from testing the academic utility of other strategies which might enhance the turnaround strategy of the problem at hand.

**THE WAY FORWARD :The case for collaborative learning :**

In addition to the light shed in the above paragraphs must also be understood the thinking behind revisiting Dowse’s paper “A hundred times we learned from one another.”Dowse’s paper is a subtle call to instructors to turn their lecture rooms into theatres that are conducive to collaborative learning. She argues that it is

“through conversation as part of a general discourse within a community that students whose first language may differ from that of others, but for whom the language of learning is English, are able to share with tutors and other students, and to negotiate a meaning. The construction of knowledge is consequently dependent on conversation between students, their peers and the tutors within a collaborative community.”<sup>5</sup>

In her paper “Group Dynamics In Collaborative Learning : Contextual Issues And Considerations”NirupmaJaiminicomments the collaborative learning thus:

“When a member is more knowledgeable than the other, we speculate that the latter learns from the former. What is more surprising is that the more able peer does also benefit from collaborative learning. It is now well documented that providing an explanation improves the knowledge of the explainer himself, even more sometimes that the explainee’s knowledge. Explanation is viewed as an interactive process in which the partners try to understand each other.”<sup>6</sup>

The above argument also seems to make a case of putting in place measures that would promote collaborative learning to prove the validity of Jaimini’s claim that “in the group learning contexts thinking is viewed as a discussion that one has with oneself and which develops on the basis of discussions one had with others”.<sup>7</sup> He contends further that peer collaboration can help high-achiever have a more positive attitude about learning, become more motivated, and feel better about themselves when they are seen as resources to their peers instead of competitors.<sup>8</sup>Marieken Swart in her paper entitled“Group Work And Collaborative Learning

<sup>3</sup> J. Pick-Sarver : “Student Life - The Sophomore Slump”, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> J. E. McBurnie, M. Campbell, J. West : “Avoiding the second year slump: A transition framework for students for students progressing through university”, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup>C. Dowse : “A hundred times we learnt from one another” p. 1.

<sup>6</sup>N. Jaimini : “Group Dynamics In Collaborative Learning: Contextual Issues And Considerations”, p. 84.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

**Revisited: Coach Or Pumpkin” puts emphasis on the importance of reckoning with ‘elements essential to collaborative learning’ to ensure desired outcomes.**

## **CONCLUSION**

**Over and above the information gleaned from the data collected I have personally observed that the 21<sup>st</sup> century university entrant is more of a dependant in the lecture room, and further that academic potential, a kind of an inborn gift is not dictated by pre-university educational background. This may mean that to extract the learners’ academic potential the instructor needs to let them see and experience that they are individually endowed with strengths unique to them as individuals, an amazing confidence booster! TO BE NOTED IS THAT the TAU project has revealed that teaching is a learning experience for both the instructor and student BUT it is one hatNEVER ENDS BECAUSE NO EFFORT IS A GUARANTEE OF 100% SUCCESS.**