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Writing in English with an 'African voice': ownership, identity and learning

ABSTRACT

The paper draws on the academic literacies approach to student writing and investigates academic writing, in English, by speakers of African languages at the University of Natal, Durban. Given that education can be considered to involve the formation of consciousness and identity, we ask to what extent these speakers of other primary languages feel able to participate fully in this and to claim ownership of the knowledge construction required in tertiary education. To answer this question we investigate whether black students feel able to write in the academic context with an 'own voice'. Interviews with 20 students suggest that few respondents feel able to assume an African identity in our university. We consider ways in which the university might be more adequately constituted as a 'site of diversity' (Lillis, 2001): by reconsidering the current monolingual bias of teaching and learning, and by revisiting the knowledges that students are expected to own.

Keywords:

academic literacies; academic writing; African languages; identity; voice; ownership; knowledge construction; diversity

Introduction

This article seeks to add to the growing body of information around (non-traditional) students and their perceptions of academic writing, both in South Africa and in other countries (Thesen, 1997; Ivanic, 1997; Angelil-Carter, 1998; Leibowitz and Mohamed, 2000; Lillis, 2001). Common to much of this work is its commitment to the "academic literacies" framework developed by the new literacy theorists such as Gee (1996), Fairclough (1992), Street (1984), Kress (1989) and Heath (1983), which seeks to locate the study of student writing within the socio-political and ideological context of the specific institution of tertiary education (Lea & Street, 2000: 32–33).

This paper reflects on the situation at the University of Natal in Durban, which, in line with many other universities, is struggling to come to terms with the increased diversity of the student body, in terms of ethnicity, age and gender.[i] Over the past decade there has been relatively little change in the institutional culture, in which "circles of privilege" still work towards perpetuating

the dominance of whites (and in the main of white males) (Kapp, 1998: 22). While the University of Natal has declared a progressive language policy, there has been as yet little serious attempt to give multilingualism appropriate status on campus. At the same time, awareness of the importance of language in cognitive development is spreading, although this tends to be understood solely in terms of the importance of English language proficiency. (English) Language development, long thought to be the domain of the Human Sciences, is now being addressed in most other faculties as well.

The discussion of academic writing has come to focus increasingly around issues of identity, "voice" and ownership, and it is these concepts which we will draw on here. Moore et al, citing Bernstein, have recently stressed that education involves not simply the acquisition of knowledge, but also, importantly, the "formation of the consciousness and identity of learners" (Moore et al, 1998: 13). The terms "consciousness" and "identity" imply increasing reflection about and awareness of one's own thought processes and ideas, decision-taking as to what one does and does not find appropriate, and the claiming of ownership of self, the claiming of an "own(ed) identity" (Ivanic, 1997; see also Clark and Ivanic 1997) – issues which lie at the core of successful academic writing. Clearly, the educative process at university is intended to have some influence on these processes. But at the same time students as young adults bring their own already complex identity formations with them, in which they draw on their life histories, prior education, family, social, cultural, gender and linguistic context; and they respond to the curriculum not necessarily as lecturers hope and intend, but in terms of their "own perceptions and priorities" (Moore et al, 1998: 13). (We will argue below that, for black students at the University of Natal, one of these priorities is "being an African".) Successful "formation of the consciousness and identity of learners" should involve the "integration of diverse experiences and different roles", the ability to "weave them into a single coherent narrative" (Cameron, 2000: 5). But this implies an educative context in which students are indeed able to participate fully in knowledge construction, and feel they can claim ownership of this. Is this the case for black students at the University of Natal? We will seek to answer this question by considering whether students feel they are able to write with an "own voice".

The construct "voice" or "own voice" has in recent years been the focus of considerable research interest (Bakhtin, 1986, Morris, 1994, Ivanic, 1997); it is intended to signify the person of the author as visible in the text being produced, and is considered by many to be a prerequisite for successful academic writing.[ii] At the same time, any "own voice" in writing must be mediated through language, and for many students the language required for academic literacy is not the primary language spoken at home. Becoming fully proficient in an additional language, as well as coming to terms with its cultural load, places additional challenges on ownership; and in addition, the saliency of ethnic languages in South African identity formations renders "ownership" specifically of English as an additional language fraught. For the purposes of this paper, however, we focused not on individual identity formations such as "Zulu", "Sotho" etc., but rather on "African", on the assumption that black students in the context of higher education see themselves as having much in common. This assumption was confirmed in the various interviews undertaken. Hence we formulated the underlying question in this paper: do black students at the University of Natal in Durban find it possible to write in English with an "African voice"? Our discussion will be based on structured interviews held with approximately 20 Zulu-speaking students from a range of faculties, and undertaken by Zulu-speaking student tutors. [iii]

Student interview responses

The interview began by asking to what extent the student identities available on this particular university campus are considered able to accommodate a sense of being African. Do students indeed find it possible to be an African student on this campus? All the students interviewed were in agreement that they were African. Their responses together created a broad spectrum of what was perceived to constitute one as "African": physical appearance, including skin colour and hair; race more generally; birth, parentage, father's name; the people one associates with; culture and customs, heritage and history, beliefs, religion, traditional activities; one's upbringing in this type of cultural context; one's home language, and the way one speaks English; ways of thinking; and finally, feeling African; and (strongly and repeatedly), a sense of pride in being an African.

Yet the majority of these students felt that it was impossible, or at least difficult, to be an "African student" at the University of Natal. Those few who felt this was possible, expressed themselves only in negative terms: "I do not feel discriminated" (Beki); "I do not feel threatened" (Dudu); "so far I'm coping" (Sicelo), which gives little sense of what such an African identity might be. Most students felt that they were required to accommodate to the mainstream western culture, "to leave our cultures", as Thabo put it. "There is no space to express my Africanness. I don't feel proud. There are things that suppress me to be who I am." (Hlengiwe) "The space is white, and we are expected to live as they live. They do not understand how Africans live." (Nhlanhla) This impossibility is to a considerable extent felt to be an issue of language, due to the fact that English is the medium of instruction. "I do not think there is that space for me to express myself. I should be allowed to express myself in Zulu. But lecturers are white and you can go to them and start talking to them in Zulu – you come across a problem. Same thing applies with regard to writing." (Mpume) "If you want to be an 'African' student, you can be, but one has to consider the roles in terms of the language and the UND culture. There is not enough space; you have to use the western language." (Sithembiso)

Similarly, the curriculum is perceived as only rarely catering for the needs of African students. "At Res the environment enables us to play a role, but academically we are not given much opportunity. The curriculum accommodates those who are first language speakers." (Musa) "Some courses relate to culture, but generally there is no space. Lecturers present things in English. We hardly feel we are Africans inside the class and even outside." (Nomusa) With specific reference to the study of Law: "University education does not accommodate the African voice, especially in my department we are discouraged instead. Customary law in marriage is criticised and made hated. They say it has a discriminatory aspect, yet it is what we Africans practise." (Sizwe)

Most respondents reflect on the lack of space for African students, which they find "compromising"; but in which they acquiesce. Only one respondent speaks of the possibility of actually creating space. "I wouldn't say there is one space readily available but one has to create it for oneself." (Sandile)

A thoughtful statement by Takelani allows the underlying perception of identity to become clearer. "The university is like breeding a new culture, new cultural behaviours. You have to be integrated, there is no space to behave as an African, because there are different people from different backgrounds that you have to mingle with and come out as a new person." Interestingly, this statement concludes with the words: "You compromise yourself." This suggests that African identity, as perceived by these students, is seen as something pre-existing and already constituted, and to be maintained. There is little sense that "being a student" might imply development of oneself as a person, which is likely to result in at least a change or modification of one's former identity. Similarly, African culture seen as something already constituted and pre-existing;

according to these respondents, any change can only involve a change away from it. African culture itself will not change.

In the university context, therefore, it is not at all easy to express oneself as an African student, and many students simply accept this. "I have deprived myself of that, because of adapting other cultures. But the way I present myself to people still makes me feel I am an African. We have values, principles and norms." (Nomusa) One route would be to use Zulu or another African language; but, as most staff do not speak Zulu, this is barely feasible. "One might express oneself as an African in the way s/he behaves and speaks, by being proud of speaking your language without being intimidated. Yes I do it proudly." (Hlengiwe) "Through the behavior and the way of speaking. Yes I do it but then I am limited to a certain extent. " (Mfundo) "In speaking Zulu. There is Zulu speaking, during assessment in drama performances." (Sandile) Significantly, Sandile continues: "We have to claim the space." Yet this effort to "claim the space" is not easily undertaken. (I speak as an African student) "as much as I possibly can, but I see myself as a rebel.– that I am shouting out to be seen as an African. It is a conscious effort." (Thobeka)

Can this awareness of being an African be reflected, or expressed, in academic writing? The question, as to whether students write "as an African", and if so how, produced a wide range of responses. Firstly, many respondents felt that lecturer expectations make this impossible. "My lecturers are English. You are penalised for expressing yourself as an African." (Musa) "African ideas are suppressed by western ideas. I rely on western books." (Thabo) "No, you write what you think the lecturer is asking from you. You do not write with your own voice. If you wrote with your own voice you would not write what the lecturer is expecting from you." (Takelani)

Secondly, students speak of avoiding attempting to write as Africans, in that the medium of instruction is English, and the mainstream campus culture is westernized. "I would say yes, one can write as an African, but the problem is with the medium of instruction that is used in this institution. There is a big misunderstanding between the mainstream culture and being an African student in UND." (Hlengiwe) "Yes, one can write as an African but practically we don't do it because of the mainstream culture that does not give the space to do so." (Mfundo) "No, one cannot write as an African because the mainstream culture uses the style of writing that is only understood to them. This would entail Africans being unable to cope with the University standard, and will cause many failures on the African side." (Sithembiso)

Whether writing as an African is possible or not is held to depend very much on the writing topic. "It can depend on the topic of your essay, but it does not happen." (Mthokozisi) "I would be so irrelevant in law if I did. I would be totally out of question. Maybe in some courses it happens." (Nomusa) Only on rare occasions does it become possible. "Yes. It is important to write as an African. I did history and a question relating to African history makes me become subjective. I try to express the African voice." (Jabulani)

Four of the twenty respondents sought to conceptualise what writing with an African voice might be. "It entails the type of background that you come from, your location. Your response is biased to the (less) poor and less fortunate."(Sicelo) "Yes, in the sense that he could express the ills of the African people." (Velaphi) " … you are writing for a minority group – target audience, targeting a small section of the society, not in a white perspective way in which everybody will be receptive to your work." (Thobeka) (It would) "entail having a strong African tone to whatever we write; drawing from experience in this living country and making those experiences as raw, crude in the best possible way as possible." (Sandile) According to these responses, writing as an African involves committed writing which speaks to the actual situation, past and present, of

Africans, and which is intended for a specific audience who are likely to react with empathy, through having a common history and background.

Two phrases used by respondents recall the requirements typically spelled out by lecturing staff for academic essays. Mpume says that "writing in Zulu makes you emotional and not answering the question"; Jabulani reports that "a question relating to African history makes me become subjective". Were these answers given with reference to the standard academic criteria of "objectivity" and "clear focus on the question"? Does the criterion of objectivity in particular preempt students' attempts to "write with an African voice"?

We can conclude that it is considered difficult, to say the least, to write with an African voice. At the same time, there were only a few statements which suggested that the "African voice" was less important, or that one might willingly compromise. "No, and it is impossible. We are so used to English, and terms are not available in Zulu." (Thulani) (Clearly, this student also assumes that he would be writing in an African language.) "I do not really see a difference between the African and any other type of writing." (Sicelo) "Rather than change completely, striking a balance will be mostly welcome, i.e. have African writers and then western writers." (Thabo)

The majority felt clearly that writing as an African was important – but for many this immediately entailed writing in an African language. Pule saw a need for both Zulu and English: "Yes, I do. It is your right to express yourself in your culture or language. No, in the sense of a need to acquaint yourself with what the rest of the world , in order to meet the standards of the rest of the world. To meet those standards we need to get used to expressing yourself in foreign culture." (And clearly, this latter would no longer be "writing in an African voice".) "It is easy to convey/ express the sufferings of the African people in your own language – hunger, hardships, violence, poverty, etc." (Velaphi) Respondents felt it was important to address African views and issues, to have an impact on lecturers, to teach them what being an African means, and in this way to help other students. "… it's about time Africans express their own views – own views/ideas." (Thobeka) "One has to be proud of being an African and being who you are. There is a lot to write about your culture. I think writing as an 'African' will give me space in terms of my voice to the people and my pride delivered to other nations." (Sithembiso) "In many ways if what you write has an impact on the lecturers. There is a need so that other people can learn what it means." Nomusa) "There is a need of writing as an African. That would make us feel acceptable and being part of this institution. The way to reach their ways of writing is to challenge them to free us to write according to our Africanness and force them to understand us as they do with us to them." (Mfundo) "Yes I do. I would write in English so as to be able to tell someone out there and not to close myself down. This would lead to other students being accommodated." (Mpume)

Yet in spite of this strongly felt need, a number of factors discourage students from attempting to write as an African in the context of their studies. Firstly, students have serious difficulties in relating to "mainstream culture" on campus – the culture which they perceive as dominant in the curriculum. "It is impossible because the mainstream culture is white. So you are urged to write in a way that they would understand. They expect you to use special words in your writing." (Hlengiwe) She continues: "It is not accessible because they are expecting us to follow their culture whereas they don't want to meet us halfway… I don't understand it at all because there is no communication that might make us understand each one's culture." "It is a problem, because it assumes we have the same culture whereas we come from different backgrounds. It makes you forget your culture. I do not understand it." (Takelani) "It is inconveniencing. Everything is western (courses). There is no space to write as an African. Technology is western and not African." (Pule) (This same point was echoed by an Engineering student.) "It is difficult,

especially to a person from rural schools like myself. They use terms I do not understand and you find yourself laughing at jokes you do not understand…. You are forced, at times you feel lost." (Musa) "In the lecture you read the lecturer and even understand the jokes he makes, so that you not found on the wrong side." (Mthokozisi) "They don't take initiatives in learning our African languages." (Mfundo) "Yes, instead of them being keen to learn our languages, they turn them into a joke… You don't have a choice… They don't allow us to express ourselves the way we feel." (Sithembiso) "If lecturers were African things would have been different. We would chat with those guys, man (laughing). We have problems hearing these white lecturers." (Thabo) Sizwe sums up, saying simply: "the mainstream culture kills our cultures."

Secondly, students are extremely aware that they are required to write in what they label a foreign language. "Writing in English is a problem. Things would have been better in Zulu." (Dudu) "The education system has killed that energy of writing as an African" (Mpume) "If I was expressing the African views I would not be writing in English. English has a certain way of expressing things, a tone you have to take when you write." (Sicelo) "Writing with the language that is not yours is problematic. In that way you can't write as an African. I have never attempted it because I am afraid that would get fail at the end of the day." (Mfundo) This phrase, a "language that is not yours", speaks of considerable distance from English; there is little suggestion here of an emerging ownership of English.

Thirdly, students need to score marks, and this is a major factor in leading them to write in ways they assume lecturers expect. They are well aware of institutional power relations, located not least in assessment practices. "For marks purposes you have to compromise. …. I try to be western to score marks." (Musa) "I write what is expected of me. I just write in English." (Thulani) "In most cases I want to impress my lecturer. I write what they want to hear and what will give me marks… I am trying to get my degree. It gives you no choice, but to write what the lecturer wants – It has nothing to do with the African writing." (Nomusa) "I do not even try (to write as an African), because I know that the kind of writing will be underestimated. You are marked off just for your tendency to write as an African." (Takelani)

In what ways do students respond to these various pressures? Many speak of allowing themselves to become assimilated, they see themselves adapting and compromising, whether they feel they comprehend mainstream culture or not. "No, … (mainstream culture) is not accessible because they are expecting us to follow their culture whereas they don't want to meet us halfway. … I don't understand it at all because there is no communication that might make us understand each one's culture… I was told that unless I change the style of writing, I would fail." (Hlengiwe) This is a third year student, who therefore obviously must have changed her style of writing and adapted. "… you sort of adapt to it. And it is very accessible to be honest. I have grown to understand and accept it – it is part of our lives any way." (Nomusa) But at the same time, this second year student speaks of having deprived herself of her Africanness, because of adapting to other cultures. "You have to adapt – you have to be a chameleon. You take on a culture that is not your own. People end up being something they are not – losing identity in the process." (Thobeka) (Thobeka, too perceives identity as something pre-existing that can be lost.) Mthokozisi's response points to the lack of a link to the lived experience of students: "When you write you write what is expected. Information in the library is the main influence." Musa and Nhlanhla reply succinctly: "I compromise my culture." "I write what has been taught, suppressing my Africanness."

A second group of responses is more ambivalent, noting at least an attempt, and perhaps some degree of achievement in writing as an African. "Sometimes. In a course in Social Anthropology – culture and society I felt I was writing as an African." (Pule) "I do not write as such, but I attempt

to write as an African. There are constraints. I need to write to pass. But I am not allowed to express myself freely." (Sicelo) "I have no choice because of the medium of instruction… one can improve his or her English and make the culture accessible. I am quite strengthened and have no choice…. it takes time but affordable." (Mpume) "Yes, I attempt to, but I do not feel I have achieved it. I think I am just writing it as a person who was taught to write." (Thobeka)

Finally, a small third group speaks to a strong sense of the need to proclaim an African identity, including the willingness to challenge others. It is wrong to suppress one's African identity "because we will end up being coconuts because we will be whites inside and black outside." (Mfundo) (The "coconut" metaphor is frequently heard at present.) Sithembiso: "No, you have to be proud of who you are because at the end of the day you will end up where you came from." (Sithembiso) "African identity impresses me and so when I am given the opportunity to write about something that pertains to Africans I excel and rejoice being given the opportunity to assert African identity." (Jabulane) Sandile expresses most clearly and strongly the perception that all students have their rights, and need to challenge others if necessary, to find their own space. (This student speaks of himself as a writer, so presumably has much greater experience in writing than others.) "Yes, it is possible, but one has to find a space for himself… I don't have problems in challenging them, in taking care of my rights as a student…. Yes I do attempt to write as an African, because I feel free to write as an African."

Occasional students, therefore, do experience the possibility of "writing as an African" on campus. Are these moments at which ownership of the English language, too, might begin to emerge? The point has been frequently made that such an "owned variety" of African English would – to a certain extent at least – be an "own language". Chisanga and Kamwangamalu (1997), for instance, identify what they term "processes in owning the other tongue": lexical transfer, semantic extension, syntactic transfer. On the other hand, such acculturation away from standard English is often simply labelled "error", or "non-standard", and this particularly in the context of tertiary education with its concern for "academic language proficiency". Certainly the issue of acculturation must be treated with some caution. Broken language usage quite simply impedes communication; a shift in language ownership, on the other hand, must presuppose some evidence of emerging systemacity in language structures and usage patterns, in order for new meanings to be carried effectively. Be this as it may, are there any indications in the interviews that respondents are beginning to "own" their own usages in English, or do they accept that, as "second-language speakers", their usage patterns are simply wrong?

All the respondents have a strong sense that their primary language does affect the way in which they use English, on a variety of levels. Some are willing to accept the label "mistakes" or "errors" for their "deviations" (see Kachru, 1992: 62), but many rather seek to explore and describe the effects of writing in an additional language. "Writing in African language causes you to make errors. You think in your language and try to translate your thoughts." (Musa) "Yes, a lot of errors. I think as an African. Errors are caused by transformational clash from African language to English. From African to English I won't exactly express myself. It does clash with my African voice … There are deep feelings and idioms that I know will be better expressed in my language." (Nomusa) "It is not all about learning the language only but the culture as well. Essays are returned with lots of question marks, because there is no understanding between the two cultures." (Sithembiso) "It is very difficult because you cannot express what you feel inside you while writing. All the time you are given instructions how to express yourself. There is no free choice." (Mfundo) "Our using English impacts negatively on our writing skill. English causes my voice to be suppressed. There are many Africans who would enjoy writing in their own language because

the medium of English makes one struggle and the English markers sometimes find that your English makes no sense." (Takelani) Most respondents clearly interpret the attitude of lecturing staff and the corrections made by assessors in terms of a lack of understanding of their situation. Only one respondent mentions lecturing staff as understanding and overlooking what he – and they – term "errors".

A few respondents differentiate between their own perceptions and those of assessors and lecturing staff. "In fact no, but they criticize our style of writing, saying that we – our writing style is very bad. Writing in an African style is not acceptable ." (Mfundo) "It is not my fault if seeing those `errors'; but the mainstream culture thinks that my style of writing causes me to make errors." (Sandile) "No, not in my view, but maybe a lecturer marking me would think I am." (Thobeka) "It doesn't cause you to make errors, but it is the perception of those who are marking that they think that the way we express ourselves causes us to make errors." (Hlengiwe) These few responses seem to indicate a slowly emerging perception that speakers of African languages may legitimately claim to be writing an own variety of English. However, there is little sense of the creativity that Kachru assumes would be involved in this process.

What consequences may this have for the way students write in English? For a variety of reasons, respondents see themselves as writing according to (foreign or western) norms that have been set up by others. The main thrust of their writing effort is in trying to satisfy these norms. Only on rare occasions do they find it possible to write "as an African", probably with an "African voice". (This only happens where the topic is suitable, and presumably where they feel they will find understanding.) This has other consequences: a lack of freedom in expression, the inability to express deep feelings well; and a lack of confidence when writing. "You are urged to write in a way that they would understand. They expect you to use special words in your writing." (Hlengiwe) "English has a certain way of expressing things, a tone you have to take when you write… I attempt to write as an African. There are constraints. I need to write to pass. But I am not allowed to express myself freely." (Sicelo) "There are deep feelings and idioms that I know will be better expressed in my language." (Nomusa)

And on those few occasions where students do attempt to "write like an African": what might this involve? Firstly and very clearly, writing in an African language. Secondly, if English has to be used, differences in style and vocabulary are to be expected. Some respondents accept that these differences are "errors", others here too seek to challenge the status quo. Thirdly, and importantly: writing as an African presupposes a very specific content and audience: (You are) "express(ing) the ills of the African people … hunger, hardships, violence, poverty, etc." (Velaphi) "It entails the type of background that you come from, your location. Your response is biased to the (less) poor and less fortunate." (Sicelo) " … you are writing for a minority group – target audience, targeting a small section of the society, not in a white perspective way in which everybody will be receptive to your work." (Thobeka) Writing as an African expresses real needs and experiences of the African people to those who are able to understand them, because they have shared this experience.

Discussion

We began with an understanding of the educative process in terms of "developing consciousness and identity", which presumes the need for students to take ownership of their academic writing by writing with what we termed an own(ed) voice. Within this context, the term "African voice", drawing on an identity construction claimed by many black students, was selected for closer investigation. Interviewees were asked whether they felt able to express themselves as Africans on

the University of Natal, Durban, campus, and whether they felt able to write with an African voice. While respondents clearly felt a desire, in the context of their studies, to be able to assume an African identity, few saw themselves able to achieve this.

The responses suggest a number of underlying causes. The largely monolingual learning and teaching practice which remains entrenched on campus contributes to perpetuating the dominance of what these students term "mainstream culture", and from which they feel excluded. Within this monolingual context, specific practices of knowledge construction and academic writing are valued, which tends to disadvantage any students not from strongly literate middle-class backgrounds. This will include many black students, who, in addition, will not be utilising their primary language. Furthermore, "African identities" tend to be understood in essentialist terms; as such they are conservative in nature and resist being influenced by other cultures and identities. Finally, many black students view the English language which they are required to use on campus at best as a necessary tool, but in some cases with suspicion, if not dislike.

According to Lillis, "any decision about student writing pedagogy involves questions about the project of higher education itself. What is it for? Who is it for? Which practices are to be valued, and why? The kinds of writing that are demanded, and the ways in which these are taught … are integral to our aims in, and for, higher education" (2001: 167). Lillis is focusing on writing; but her questions relate equally well to higher education teaching and learning practices more generally. She continues to speak of the "need to reconceive higher education as a site of diversity, with the potential to draw on and enact a range of discourse practices and identities" (Lillis, 2001: 167). This is what the University of Natal has been attempting for some time, but – in the eyes of these respondents – with little success.

What might this entail, Higher Education as a "site of diversity"? Rather than focusing on the much-analysed nominal form "diversity", let us rather consider the concept in its verbal form "to diversify" (Beall, 1997). In its nominal form, "diversity" appears static and unmoving; whereas the verbal form foregrounds the actors who are necessary to create diversity, actors who construct and own various identities and, for the moment, reject others. A "site of diversity" cannot be one in which diversity is envisioned as something pre-existing and given, and hence to be managed from above, but must rather involve giving those enacting diversity and seeking to diversify, the space to accept and reject and to construct themselves in ways which they desire. Yet this seems to be precisely what is currently not possible on the University of Natal campus.

We wish to argue here that language, as both the bearer and the constituent of identity and culture, plays a primary role in instituting or limiting diversity. The decision to construe teaching and learning in monolingual terms has effects of greater consequence than simply hindering the learning process for those whose primary language is thereby disqualified. At the same time it designates as irrelevant what many students experience as their primary identity, making it extremely difficult for them to relate this identity to their studies and develop an "academic identity". This is exacerbated by the fact that identities in South Africa have long been constructed primarily in linguistic terms; which in turn leads many black students to reject English as irrelevant to their identity.

Any attempt to make a university a "site of diversity" cannot avoid dealing with the "language problem" so frequently mentioned in discussion of higher education. Most universities have now sought to tackle this "language problem" by making available (or prescribing) English language development modules of different types for those whose English is considered in need of development. While it is undoubtedly necessary that all students in today's modern world be fully proficient in English, this does not begin to address the monolingual bias of teaching and learning

which, we argue, is the other side of the "language problem" coin. It will have been noted that our respondents did not appear unduly concerned that other students could not speak an African language, but rather that staff – those in positions of power – could not. Solving the "language problem", so understood, means that academic staff will need to equip themselves with (at least) basic communicative competence in an African language, to enable less one-sided communication with students and to signal that they value African cultures and seek to understand them. In this way, they might serve as role models and encourage other monolingual students to explore beyond their own language boundaries. At the same time, learners should be encouraged to draw on African languages for selected purposes of learning and teaching, for instance, in group-work.

We can assume that a more wide-spread staff competency in African languages would improve communication with students, and signal that their own languages are validated on campus. Yet would this alone really enable students to come to "own" an academic identity which would still need to be largely expressed in the English language? Why are students so strongly disinclined to claim ownership of English?

As mentioned above, the discipline of sociolinguistics has considered the issue of "ownership" of "other" varieties of English primarily in terms of formal features, and it is doubtless significant, in a context which continues to lay great value (in several senses of the word) on standard English, that some of the students interviewed had indeed begun to reject the term "errors" as a label for what Kachru (1992: 62) has more appropriately termed "deviations". But we seek to make the point that such formal features alone are not enough to enable students to claim "ownership" of English. What was clearly voiced by a few of these respondents was a further criterion: that of content, which in turn presupposes a readership which can relate to such content: "expressing the ills of the African people", "hunger, hardships, violence, poverty". Can one indeed expect students to "own" the English they are required to use for knowledge telling and knowledge construction, unless they feel they own the knowledge they are required to tell or construct?

This leads to broader questions. Is the "African content" proposed by the students indeed considered to constitute knowledge in higher education? Possibly so in some disciplines, but it might create serious problems in others. Secondly, does the "subjective", "emotional" approach to knowledge and writing suggested by two respondents currently constitute a valid approach to knowledge construction in tertiary education? Thirdly, might it be necessary to review the genres commonly selected as constituting academic literacy? These wide-ranging issues are, in some contexts, currently under debate. We suggest that it is only when fundamental issues of this nature are addressed that students will find the space to construct academic identities as Africans, identities which can express themselves in owned academic writing, and will come to claim ownership of higher education.

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Endnotes

1. Class differences have become less salient over the past two years; increasingly, the University of Natal seems to be attracting and catering for middle-class students.
2. Similarly, Henning and van Rensburg (2002) have recently proclaimed the need for students to acquire an 'academic writing identity' in order to succeed in tertiary education; they attribute the lack of success of the students they investigated, not least, to their failure to develop such an 'academic identity'.
3. In the following, respondents have been assigned fictional names which reflect their gender and language background.

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